

interzone



NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2003

NUMBER 192

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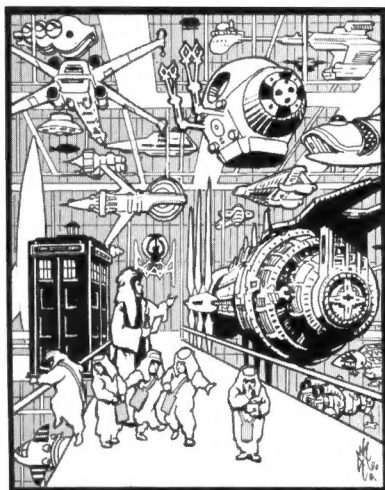
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2003

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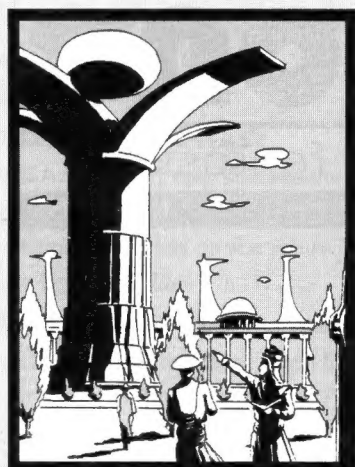
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INTERFACE

Announcement

Sadly, despite our efforts (and our failed promises) to resume a monthly schedule, issues dates have kept slipping, and so – with apologies to all readers, especially those who have been with us for a while – we bow to the inevitable and declare that *Interzone* is now a bimonthly magazine. Actually, we seem to have made the move some months ago, with issue 189 (May/June 2003), but we failed to recognize it at the time. Issue 190 was dated July/August, and although issue 191 was dated simply “September” it should really be regarded, retrospectively, as the September/October issue.

So please don't look for a separate “October 2003” issue, as there is none. But this does not mean that we have somehow skipped an issue. The issue numbering remains continuous (so no one loses out on their subscription), and the intention is that the magazine should now keep to a steady bimonthly schedule. All on-going subscriptions take no account of cover dates, and are calculated by number of issues. The next *Interzone*, number 193, will be the January/February 2004 issue.

If we can find some substantial new backing, then it may be that the magazine will return to a monthly schedule at some point in the future; but for now, and for the immediately foreseeable, it's a bimonthly publication. We're sorry that this has proved necessary, but we're also confident that it won't affect the quality of *Interzone* – we have some fine stories lined up for coming issues. Keep reading!

Dear Editors:

Up to now I have enjoyed *Interzone* very much, and I hope that you will continue for another 20 years. Thank you for that. I must admit, though, that I'm a bit worried that *IZ* is not in as good (financial?) health as one would hope, as the recent appearance of bimonthly issues seem to suggest. I really do hope that the difficult times you're going through right now do not affect the health of *IZ* nor the quality of the published stories. It would be good to reassure the readers that everything is well by stating why exactly there is a persistent slippage in the time schedule. Unless, of course, everything isn't all that well (which by the way I sincerely hope isn't the case). But even then, I think it would be good to inform the reader about the reasons why this is if for no other reason to take away the speculation about the why's and the how's.

Now onto something else: the stories. Notwithstanding that I do like them, I notice that a large number do not have that sf feel I'm looking for. Rather, they either have a surrealist (or magic-realistic – if that's the word) feel to them, like all stories by Zoran Zivkovic – or they (in my eyes) can be catalogued as fantasy (which I define as entirely non-scientific). I am, and I think many other readers with me, a fan of *science* fiction. Which, for me, translates into stories which have a distinct scientific element. Whether this element is the core of the story (I consider these stories as “hard sf” and I like these very much – after all, I have a PhD in Physics) or whether it is merely a vehicle for the description of the background world or universe in which the story is set, doesn't bother me that much. For me, these kinds of stories do give me back the sense of wonder I experience while reading 1950s and 1960s sf stories. And this just doesn't happen with magic-realistic or fantasy stories. So, if possible at all, please try to get a larger number of *science*-fiction stories into the magazine. Other than that, *IZ* is still one of the better magazines out there. Keep up the good work!

Paul de Bakker
Belgium

Editor: *Thanks for your good wishes. The reasons for the change in schedule are indeed mainly financial, although there have also been lesser (personal) reasons. But we certainly don't think the new bimonthly schedule will adversely affect the quality of the stories – far from it. As for your call for more stories with scientific content,*

well, we tend to agree with you, but readers' tastes vary and so we need to maintain some range. With that proviso, though, we'll see what we can do...

The Urge to Acquire

Dear Editors:

I just finished reading Gary Westfahl's interesting piece on science fiction's failure to realistically address the dismal science of economics (*Interzone* 189). I thought he (and your readers) might be interested in an article I wrote a couple of years ago on the human urge to trade as a motivation for creating a space-faring civilization, and unrealistic economic models being a reason that has not happened. It was originally published in the academic journal *Earth Space Review*, and reprinted in the British Interplanetary Society's *Spaceflight*:

www.saber.net/~donaldrf/sfmodel.pdf

One other thought: the urge to senselessly acquire is hardly confined to science-fiction fans. In recent years, I have helped to clean out the homes of several individuals who were deceased or could no longer live on their own, not least that of my parents. In all cases, the homes were *stuffed* with things that the owner clearly had viewed as valuable; often, one could not easily move around the house. None of these were especially wealthy individuals. They were solidly middle-class, with just enough resources to own a modest home and fill it with useless junk.

I've been developing the theory that this behaviour is widespread and new, dependent on the evolution of a dominant middle class, which only really happened in the first half of the last century. Even those of “modest means” in Europe and the United States are extremely wealthy by world standards. They have surplus income and no need to spend it on anything productive. Therefore, they often spend it eccentric behaviour (“trainspotting,” publishing fan magazines) and on acquiring stuff and squirrelling it away. I wonder if the latter behaviour is somehow subconsciously preparing for a possible catastrophe to come. It may not be a coincidence that these individuals were all children of the Great Depression.

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A Monument to After-Thought Unveiled

Paul Di Filippo

"Life is an after-thought..."

— Robert Frost, age 18,
"A Monument to After-Thought Unveiled"

Up the steep ascent of College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, in the March of 1924, at a wintry, shadow-thronged hour long past midnight, laboured the attenuated, castoff-swaddled form of the horror writer.

He had been tramping about through both city and countryside since 10 a.m. of the previous day, seeking to quiet his tumultuous brain, where thoughts raced like chips in a millstream. That selfsame morning had seen the dawn of his natal day, marking his 50th year of existence on this cursed globe. The intense self-reflection occasioned by this portentous milestone had immediately overwhelmed all the makeshift defences of sanity he had erected over the past twelve years, since that tragic day in 1912 when his life had gone so radically off course. Unable to pen either new fiction or correspondence, his wonted reading materials bleached of interest, the horror writer had hastily donned several layers of moth-eaten sweaters atop his omnipresent union suit, wool

trousers and broadcloth shirt. Against the exterior cold (hardly any worse than that in his cheap rented rooms; would this spring never arrive?), he completed his outfit with the long tatty cloth coat kindly passed down to him by two of his few local friends, the similarly impoverished poetess Muriel Eddy and her husband, fellow *Weird Tales* contributor Clifford Eddy. Thus accoutred, with less than 30 cents in change to supply his nourishment for the day's exertions, he plunged out of his grim widower's flat.

In the ensuing hours he covered much ground. Heading north out of the city, he made for Quinsnick Park, one of his favourite sylvan locales, where he oft composed his work *al fresco*, during temperate seasons. But for once, sight of the massive boulders like Cyclopean monuments and large, dark, mysterious Olney Lake had failed to raise his spirits. The leafless trees seemed to mock all human ambition, betokening a terminus to life upon the planet, a day when no living thing would stir from icy pole to pole.

From there he had sought solace in several of his favourite small villages bordering the Park, such as Saylesville and Fairlawn. But the hustle and bustle of factory workers and tradesmen and schoolchildren held no distraction for him today.

Despairing of his old haunts, he struck out for pastures less well-trodden, crossing into Valley Falls and thence into neighbouring Massachusetts. But even the suggestive, moss-covered, anciently disused rural cemeteries he chanced upon, with their weathered stones listing like drunken sailors, failed to lift his thoughts out of their weary self-pitying maelstrom.

From here, he had little memory of the paths and byroads he had taken. A vague sensation of having eaten at a lunch wagon – some noxious meat pie swilled down with coffee – remained with him. All he knew was that when dusk had fallen he was some score of miles away from home, in the town of Bristol, on the East Bay. Weary and dispirited, he spent his last five cents on a trolley ride, but got off impulsively some few miles outside of Providence. The rest of the hours until his footsore ascent of College Hill had been spent at a nighted overlook of the Bay, as he revolved the idea of self-destruction in his fatigued brain. The nigrescent tidal waters seemed to whisper alluring invitations to his soul.

But at last he had not so much positively decided against such a cowardly way out of his troubles, as he had merely acknowledged that today he lacked the initiative to consummate such a frequently considered relief. And so, without having either surmounted or been beaten by his nightmares, but rather merely exhausted them while they exhausted him, he had once more turned his feet toward home.

Now, climbing from the sidewalk up the steps to his shabby Waterman Street residence, he fumbled for the key to a place he could hardly distinguish with the term “home,” a place equally meaningless to him as every other place on earth.

Beyond the front door, in the common hall, the smell of early-morning greasy breakfasts cooking on illicit gas-burners came to him. Before he could attain the relative sanctuary of his own rooms, a door opened and a burly shirtless labourer emerged, making for the communal lavatory. Through the open apartment door, the horror writer caught a glimpse of a teeming family scene – slatternly wife and mother, a pack of grimy children – and the mockery of what he himself had lost twelve years ago struck like a knife into his heart.

Pushing past the sleepy, unoffending labourer, the horror writer hurled himself into his own rooms. Still dressed, he fell onto his spavined cot and, mercifully faster than he would have predicted, Robert Frost was asleep.

The 30-acre farm in Derry, New Hampshire, had never provided an authentically agrarian living for Robert Frost and his family: wife Elinor, and children Carol, Irma, Lesley and Marjorie. They had scraped by on loans and various makeshift subsidiary enterprises for twelve years. Owner of the property since 1900 (and even then only thanks to the financial support of his stern Yankee grandfather, William Prescott Frost), the ex-reporter, failed poultryman, eccentric schoolteacher and would-be poet had ultimately failed to consummate his back-to-the-land dreams, just as he had failed with all the other schemes of his maturity, including that of making his

mark on the body of American verse. Oh, yes, a few of his poems had been published, but only in such minor vehicles as the *Derry Enterprise*, the *Independent* and *New England Magazine*. But as for achieving recognition from the Boston and New York critical establishments; as for having the mass of his unpublished work (all fine material, he was convinced) gathered into book form; as for elevating his name to the same plane as that occupied by Edwin Arlington Robinson, Amy Lowell and Edgar Lee Masters – well, at the despair-inducing age of 38, he felt himself as remote from these attainments as he had been at the callow age of 16, when his first poem appeared in the *Lawrence High School Bulletin*.

The year 1912, then, marked a self-appointed climacteric in Frost's life. Determined to make a clean break with his discouraging past, he had fixed on the idea of transferring his whole family to England for an indefinite span. There, on the soil that had produced so many of the fine poets he admired, he felt that his talents would bloom and be appreciated. England held out the hope of the success that had so far eluded him in his native land. Gathering all his available resources together, including the annual stipend left to him by Grandfather Frost, the poet had just managed to cover the cost of the trip and a reasonable term abroad.

Elinor and the children were excited by the prospect. Even Elinor's frequent nervous depression – a recurring melancholy matched only by her husband's, who shared with his sister Jeanie a congenital disposition to black moods – lifted in the face of the foreign rebirth. Happily packing their many trunks, Elinor and the Frost children had speculated gaily on the new life that awaited them. Frost thought they sounded like a flock of the happy oven birds he oft admired on his botanizing walks, and was pleased.

The family was set to sail from Boston on August the 23rd.

A month prior to that date, Frost entered Hell.

It was late evening. Frost had been out alone on a ramble, wandering the hills around Derry, his head stuffed with fragments of poems, visions of public accolades, visits to Westminster Abbey. Unlike many such occasions, he had forborne to take any of his children with him, neither son Carol nor any of the girls. He had started late from home, and moreover he wanted his solitude.

Eager to regain his hearthside, nearing the road to his farm, Frost had been disconcerted by unnatural activity at several of the neighbouring homesteads. Flickering oil lamps behind curtained windows revealed that the diligent farmers and their wives were up and about much too late, as if agitated like a troubled hornets' nest.

Intuitively fearing that the source of the neighbourhood turmoil lay for some reason at his own residence, Frost quickened his pace. Could one of the children have fallen ill or been injured? Ever since the death of their first boy, Elliott, Frost had lived in fear of just such a tragedy.

The scent of smoke alerted him to the actual nature of the catastrophe. He began to run.

The entire Frost homestead, outbuildings included, raged a solar inferno, unnaturally dispelling the night. In

the rabid lineaments of the conflagration, Frost discerned a leering demonic face that conformed to the visage of his darkest terrors. A demon arising from his wallow to laugh, brushing the dirt from his eyes as he rose. And well Frost knew what the demon meant.

The useless equipment of the Derry Volunteer Fire Corps was ranked at a safe distance from the inferno, firefighters seeking to calm their nervous horses, despite their own human horror.

A familiar mustachioed man with soot-streaked face, his name driven from Frost's brain by the mortal circumstances, warily approached Frost.

"I'm sorry, Bob, but not a soul escaped. I'm sure it was quick for them though. The smoke itself –"

Those implacable words were the last sounds Frost was cognizant of for the next several days. His mind deserted his body and he collapsed to the warm, grass-tufted soil, the mockery of its rich summer fragrance of birth and growth competing with the charnel smell of the pyre.

When he next gained some small possession of his senses, he found himself in a half-familiar bedroom. Gradually he recognized the place as belonging to his friend, Sidney Cox, a teacher at Plymouth High School. A nervous Cox himself sat in a chair beside the recumbent Frost. Upon seeing the older man's eyes flicker open, Cox essayed a small smile and said, "Robert, welcome back to the world. You've been comatose for nearly a week, and we feared for your recovery."

Frost's voice husked sepulchral. "You're addressing a dead man, Sidney, with words that mean nothing."

Cox paled. "Don't say that, Robert. You've experienced a huge tragedy, certainly, but one not unparalleled in human existence. Life goes on, after all. Surely all the worldly wisdom you've shared with me in our long talks will come now to your aid."

Silent a moment, Frost eventually replied, "I find all my high-minded concepts and speech-making utterly vacuous now, Sidney. A crushing but irrefutable realization has overtaken me. All my playing with tragedy prior to last week's fatal night was just the actions of a child seeking to frighten itself with shadows, simply to make the hearthside look brighter. I was a blissfully ignorant pedant until I saw everything that mattered to me go up in cruel flames. Not only were Elinor and the children of my flesh in that holocaust, but also all the children of my fancy. All my poems are ashes now, all the verses I meant for my first book. *A Boy's Will*, Sidney, do you recall my projected title? Well, both the boy who dreamed in verse and the man who sought to perfect those dreams are dead."

Cox gamely tried to dissuade Frost from this morbid conceit. "Then who am I talking to now, may I ask?"

"A ghost, Sidney. A ghost."

Frost spent another week in Cox's tender care. Some of that time was devoted to settling his affairs in Derry. He attended the closed-casket ceremony for his family, five coffins like so many loaves of hard bread out of the oven, and saw them interred. He found a buyer for the ruined farmstead, a neighbouring farmer who generously paid more than the going rate for the property, out of sympathy

for Frost's loss. Frost banked the money without either discernible gratitude or embarrassment. What worth did this useless paper hold for a man in his position?

When as a young man Frost had thought that his offer of marriage to Elinor had been spurned, he had done something romantically foolish, if not a little mad. Bumming his way south toward Virginia's great Dismal Swamp, with half an eye toward self-destruction in that remote preserve beloved by poets from Longfellow onward, Frost had turned his back on family, friends and his art. Now that Elinor and his children and his hard-won stock of poems had been removed from him by Fate, he fixed on a similar course of action.

Bidding a terse farewell to Cox and a few others, Frost set out upon the longest ramble of his life.

Up and down the Eastern Seaboard he roamed, afoot and by rail, or hitching rides from strangers in buckboard or the occasional newfangled horseless carriages. From Miami to Baltimore, Norfolk to Portland, he made his ceaseless, pointless migrations, seeking to expunge his grief with mad activity, to lose his individual suffering self among the nameless masses of men. For money, he wrote drafts upon his account in Derry, although sometimes he had a hard time convincing suspicious bank managers that the dishevelled vagrant before them was the legitimate holder of these funds. His longest trip came when he hobo'd his way to San Francisco, the city of his birth and subsequent eleven years. There, surprisingly, amid the bittersweet memories of his childhood, he somehow derived a small nascent solace that allowed him to contemplate his future with some dim interest, albeit still no joy.

Picking up a pen one idle moment as he sat in a cheap rented room in the Tenderloin, Frost wondered what his hand intended to produce.

Much to his surprise, his long-tortured brain poured forth not a poem, but a tale. A horror tale, to be precise, one much like those of Poe, whom Frost had long admired. The story was titled "The Demiurge's Laugh," and sought to convey the hideous demon-spoken revelations Frost had derived from the immolation of his family, transplanted to the shoulders of another unfortunate.

The year was now 1914. Frost kept the manuscript of the story with him as he resumed his peregrinations, for it continued to haunt him, even though confined now to paper. One day in Chicago, he gained access to a typewriter at a library and drafted a clean copy of the text. He stuffed the typescript into an envelope and mailed it, without any means for editorial reply, to *The Black Cat* magazine, hoping to rid himself of a burden.

Half a year later, in Cleveland, he found his story in print on the newsstands.

He contacted the editor of *The Black Cat*. Payment swiftly followed, and a generous offer to submit more such stories.

By now Frost – his thick shock of hair gone white at 40, his health half-ruined, his furrowed face a map of too much drink and too many nights spent under heavy weather – was heartily sick of the road, and resolved to settle down. At first he thought of making Baltimore his

new home, in honour of Poe. But then his old love-affair with New England reawakened. That region had always represented to him the best of the country, of America's spirit. Northern New England, however, held too many painful associations, so he cast his eye toward the south.

And found Providence.

Frost arrived in the bustling industrial seaport at the head of Narragansett Bay in early 1916, just as his hoarded money was running out. After finding cheap lodgings, he began to write. At first, his occult stories were merely a means to survival. But soon they began to occupy the role of essential pressure valve on his turbulent brain.

Argosy and *All-Story*. *Thrill Book* and *Scrap Book*. *Cavalier* and *Blue Book* and *Mystery Magazine*. All soon had run horrific stories under the Robert Frost byline. "Ghost House," "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "The Road Not Taken," "The Oft-Repeated Dream," "The Witch of Coös," "A Passing Glimpse." In two years' time, Frost had amassed a considerable reputation among those readers and editors who appreciated the grimly fantastical.

A reputation that was all ashes in his mouth. Necessary as these stories were to his mental health, they represented only the palest shade of the ecstasy and pride his poems had once brought him.

Frost's growing literary prominence among a certain set made it inevitable that he would attract the notice of one of his fellow Providence citizens possessed of similar interests.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft was some 16 years Frost's junior, still a bright yet introverted Mama's boy at age 28, visibly shaken by the fact that his mother had recently been confined to Butler Hospital, in that spring of 1919. He humbly approached Frost after arranging an interview for an amateur press publication. Frost found the younger man's admiration flattering and his writerly ambitions amusing. Now that he had an audience, the ex-poet's long-stifled old urges to hold forth in long lectures reawakened for the first time in seven years. Frost resolved to take Lovecraft under his wing.

By the time Sarah Lovecraft died in 1921, her son was a changed man. He had set up housekeeping on his own, rejecting the smothering nest offered by his spinster aunts. Inspired by Frost's own professionalism, Lovecraft had broken into print himself with several beginner's stories which found homes in the same publications that Frost appeared in.

Although never happy or content, Frost took some small pleasure in the changes he had abetted in Lovecraft's life. The older man relished using the younger as sounding board for his cold-blooded cogitations on the meaninglessness of the universe. The younger, calling his mentor "Grampa Jack" as a play on "Jack Frost," seemed pleased mainly to listen, interjecting his own thoughts only occasionally.

But the changes in Lovecraft's personality had unintended consequences.

Frost was first introduced to the pretty young hat-maker and amateur-press aficionado named Sonia Greene when

she arrived in Providence to visit Lovecraft. From the outset, it was apparent that Lovecraft was as smitten with Sonia as she was with him.

The announcement of their impending marriage and move to New York City struck Frost harder than he ever imagined it could. By now, the Eddys had joined the Lovecraft-Frost circle. But as a married couple with three children, they could hardly offer Frost the complete acolyte's devotion Lovecraft had provided.

Lovecraft's departure for New York in late 1923 threw Frost into a black funk. He ceased writing for several weeks, and sought relief from his melancholy in cheap Dago wine from Federal Hill and the weary urban footpaths.

But the latest news by letter from his ex-neighbour – in conjunction with Frost's 50th birthday – had been a gust of wind that truly broke the spine of a birch already well bent.

Lovecraft had been offered the editorship of the newly launched *Weird Tales* magazine, and had gleefully accepted.

The gorgeous missus and I are off to Chicago, Grampa Jack! Whoda ever thunk this granite-ribbed Yankee would ever hie his carcass all the way out to the land of wheat and wide waters. Call me Clem and stir my coffee with a hog's knuckle! But you can rest assured that yer boy gee-ye-us editor will not forget all the sharp lessons he's larned at the feet of the Master. And now the pages of WT are wide open for some sockdolager Frostian shiver-makers!

Frost crumpled the letter and flung it across his room. Down deep, he knew he should be pleased with Lovecraft's rise in the world, and the younger man's continued friendship. But the contrast with his own sorry condition overwhelmed any empathy.

By his birthday of March 1924, Frost had reached the trough of his despair.

The smallish house in East Providence that barely contained the bubbling Eddy family was a modest dwelling indeed. Two stories tall in the main, with a single-story addition, twin-chimney'd, set on a small lot on Second Street enclosed by a black-painted picket fence, the domicile rested comfortably in frowsy disrepair. The lack of funds in the Eddy exchequer, attributable to the Bohemian ways of Muriel and Clifford, necessitated many daily hard shifts. But the life of the mind they enjoyed, the conviviality of their socializing, and their dedication to matters of art, offset any physical deprivations. That their children manifested a blithe indifference to their poverty added an aura of Edenic innocence to the household.

That late morning of March 28, 1924, a Saturday, the sun shone brightly on the Eddy doorstep. The long winter, unrelenting in its grip until just yesterday, had finally broken, it seemed, and tokens of Spring were apparent, from the burgeoning buds of the lilac by the door to the greening scents in the gentle breeze, as if the belated season were striving to make up for lost time.

Down Second Street trudged Robert Frost, hatless, his snowy hair a haycock. His perpetual air of scarred hope-

lessness seemed somewhat moderated by sheer enervation. Passing through the gate, he climbed the single step of the Eddy house, and knocked.

The door was soon thrown back by one of the Eddy children, a boisterous young girl named Flora.

"Ma! Pa! It's Uncle Bob!"

Frost reached down and absentmindedly tousled the girl's dark hair, then moved past her into the house. Battered horsehide sofa, many books on shelves and scattered elsewhere, a framed Currier and Ives scene of a sleigh stopping by a woods on a snowy evening. An isolated gas jet illuminated a corner of the parlour where sunlight did not penetrate. There, a desk hosted Clifford Eddy's typewriter and sheaves of work in progress. Clifford was not seated at his desk however.

Muriel appeared from the entrance to the kitchen. A stout, round-faced, dark-haired woman wearing glasses, Muriel beamed at the sight of her friend. The Eddys were not yet 30, and possessed all the youthful exuberance which Frost and Elinor had once enjoyed.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Muriel advanced across the room and hugged Frost. "We were just sitting down to some lunch, Bob. Won't you join us?"

"I suppose."

In the kitchen Frost encountered the rest of the Eddys: crag-faced Clifford and his Penrod-like sons, Alder and Maple, otherwise known as Al and Mel. A spread of cold chicken, potato salad, homemade bread and baked beans drew the hungry stares of the boys back after a brief polite acknowledgement of "Uncle Bob's" arrival. Once Flora had drawn up her chair and said a brief grace, the family dived into their repast.

Despite his ennui, Frost found himself possessed of an inordinate hunger. He fell on his food like a wolf, and the Eddys forbore from questioning his unannounced arrival, letting him enjoy his meal. Instead the couple and children chatted of local matters, schoolchums and neighbourhood gossip. Clifford and Muriel both sensed that any literary talk would be unwelcome. Frost maintained a dour silence.

When the last slice of bread had swabbed the final smear of mayonnaise, the children asked to be excused to play outside. Once they were gone, Frost broke down.

"Cliff, Muriel – I'm at my wit's end. I can't deny the bitter truth any longer. I've wasted my whole life. All my 50 years have been just so much dust on the wind. When I was young and heedless of life's innately tragic cast, I frittered my time away. I never pushed hard enough to get my poems into print. If I had really tried, I could have made my name by the time I was 25. But I just didn't have the gumption. Then, when – when I lost my family, I simply fell apart. I didn't have the backbone or strength to start over with my poetry, so I threw away everything I had left, and became the pitiful specimen you see before you. I – I don't know where to go from here, and I'm compounding my sins by dumping my problems in your laps."

Clifford and Muriel both rushed to contradict Frost's self-abasing autobiography.

Muriel said, "Robert Frost, you're talking nonsense now. You've led a blameless life that hasn't harmed any-

one but yourself. You're basically as healthy as a horse, despite your lack of sound nutrition and a little too much tipping. You've got ten, 20, maybe 30 good years ahead of you, if you could only get out of your own way."

"Bob," said Clifford, massaging the right side of his long jaw thoughtfully, "aren't you forgetting one important item on the credit side of your ledger? You've got your current career to be proud of. As a writer of eldritch tales, you're second to no one in this country. Haven't Howard and I often said we've learned practically everything we know from you? Why, the complimentary letters that flooded into *Weird Tales* after the appearance of your short novel 'The Star-Splitter' would have made any other writer's head swell up the size of a first-prize pumpkin at the State Fair! I know I'd kill for such a response to any of my stories."

Frost dismissed these encomiums with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Gothic tripe! Bogeyman stories for juvenile minds. What respect do such hackneyed supernatural exercises earn me from the world at large? I can't interest any publisher in assembling my tales into book form. And even if I found a publisher, no reviewer or critic in his right mind would turn his attention to such a volume. How does such low regard consort with the stature a man my age should have attained? If my writing meant anything, surely I would have earned the world's approbation by now. Perhaps I'd even be a teacher or lecturer, or hold some other respectable position."

Muriel registered her disdain for such highflown fantasies with a demure snort. "What other honours would you have? Maybe to be the Poet Laureate of the nation, standing by the President's side?"

Clifford's rough face expressed puzzlement. "Bob, what's come over you? You always held your stories in higher regard than this. Haven't they served you well on a personal level?"

"Bah! They've been nothing more than momentary stays against confusion."

"But other people love them –"

"Other people can go to hell! What have these readers ever done for me!"

Now Muriel fixed Frost with such a stern look – so foreign to her jolly face – that even his self-indulgent, self-pitying fury had to wither and vanish. She withheld her words until she was certain Frost was listening closely.

"Robert Frost, what you're lacking is a human connection to ground you in this sad and wonderful mortal world. You're always alone, even when you're in company. Just you and that whirring intellect, exploring the chilly stratosphere. You don't have anyone to nurture or take care of, someone who would do the same for you. I know you suffered a grievous loss when your wife and children perished. Lord knows if I'd hold up any better if I lost Clifford and the kids. But I do know this: there's nothing wrong with your or your life that the love of a good woman wouldn't cure."

Now Frost exhibited an air of bluff chagrin. "An old wreck like me go courting? Muriel, you must have been into the bathtub gin!"

"Don't accuse me of your own sins, Robert! I know

what I'm talking about, and I know I'm right. That's why I want you to come to a small party we're giving tonight. Cliff was going to swing by after lunch and invite you if you hadn't happened to show up on your own. There'll be a woman there I want you to meet. Someone very sympathetic to your work. A lovely person, full of pep and common sense. But special in her own way, as well."

Frost could be seen debating the matter within himself. Clifford sought to sway him by adding, "Mure'll be making her lard-crust apple pie, Bob...."

Frost got decisively to his feet. "I've got to go now."

"But Bob, why –" Muriel began.

Frost tried to appear stern, but a small yet real smile further wrinkled his seamed visage. "Hell, woman, all the hours twixt now and midnight wouldn't suffice to make me look attractive to a member of the opposite sex. But at least I can toss on a clean shirt!"

Wearing his only decent suit, a sturdy brown wool outfit, Frost returned at dusk to the Eddy household, the first of the guests to arrive. He had indeed freshened his appearance, even going so far as to get a professional haircut. The toilet-water utilized by the barber filled the Eddy's parlour with a gingery scent.

But Frost was not in a jovial mood. Clutched in his hand was a letter, the obvious source of his irritation.

Thrusting the letter under Clifford's nose, Frost said, "Read this! It was waiting for me at home like a water moccasin in the reeds. Damn the nerve of that young whelp!"

Clifford took the letter and began to read aloud.

"Dear Bob, I'm sorry to say that ye olde editor Theobald was not as mightily impressed with your latest effort, "Moth Seen in Winter," as he has been with the majority of your previous conceptions. The piece seems oversubtle and strained to me. True, the apparition of a living moth amidst a frigid clime is a potent portent of the uncanny. But the hero's rather tedious musings – pardon my extreme candour – on the fate of the moth take up much too large a portion of the story, blunting the climactic revelations, which are numinous enough already. Now, you know that I have always been an advocate of restraint when depicting the gruesome. Suggestions of the eldritch are often more effective than outright portrayals of ichor and fangs. But one is hard-pressed to say exactly what happens to your hapless indigent poet at the climactic moment. Does he "cross the gulf of well-nigh everything" into the world of perpetual summer whence came the moth? Or does he merely die of inanition in the snow-bank? *Weird Tales* readers will not stand for such shilly-shallying, I fear. Now, please, Grampa Jack, do not take my words as other than a constructive goad to produce the exquisitely chilling work of which I know you are capable. Fergit the poetry, bo', and shovel on the supernatural!"

Clifford looked up from the letter. His face bore a mixture of empathy and amusement. "Hell, Bob, you've gotten worse rejections than this. We all have! It's just part of the game. It was only natural that Howard would drift over to the enemy's camp once he got his hands on the

helm of a real magazine. Don't sweat over a single crummy rejection. Just turn that story right around. I bet you'll sell it to a better-paying market next week! Why not try the *Cosmopolitan* or *Harper's* for a change?"

Frost snatched the letter from Clifford, crumpled it and tossed it into the blazing fire on the hearth that warmed the room. But after this gesture of defiance, he deflated.

"That damnable story's already made the rounds of every possible market. I dug it out of the trunk once Lovecraft took over, since he was the only editor who had never seen it before. Cliff, I'm dry. Drained of ideas and ambitions. I'm washed up, and ready to chuck it all."

Clifford clapped his friend on the back. "Buck up, Bob! Every writer goes through rough patches. Soon you'll be pumping out better stories than ever before. I'm sure of it! But tonight you're not to worry about such things. Tonight you're just going to enjoy yourself. Muriel! Bring Bob a birch beer, please!"

Muriel emerged from the kitchen with a quart bottle of Fox-brand soda-pop and a glass. Lifting the bale, she tipped back the rubber-ringed metal cap and poured Frost his drink.

"Robert Frost, I don't want to hear another word about the business of writing tonight. You can talk about literature if you must – most of our guests will hail from the amateur press crowd, after all – but only as an appreciative reader. And when you are introduced to that special gal I mentioned, try to remember that women appreciate hearing about something other than lousy word-rates and balky editors."

Once again, Frost responded to Muriel's motherly admonitions. "Very well, I'll try. What's this filly's name, by the way?"

"Hazel Heald. She's a member of our writer's club and she's coming down all the way from Somerville, Massachusetts, for this get-together. So treat her to some of that sparkling Frost wit you dole out so sparingly."

Frost was about to plead that his wits were all dull as horseshoes when a knock sounded at the front door. Clifford went to admit the second guest of the evening, who proved to be Ed Cole, from Boston, whose journal the *Olympian* was a paragon of the amateur press scene. Cole greeted Frost heartily and began to quiz him about the prospects of the Providence Grey Sox. Soon the two men were engaged in debating the relative merits of various ballplayers. As various other guests arrived, the small parlour became warm and noisy, and Frost appeared to be actually enjoying himself.

By nine o'clock, Hazel Heald had not yet appeared, and Frost had in fact nearly forgotten the promise of her arrival. Then, in the midst of a game of laughter-provoking Charades – Frost was one of the audience – someone tapped Frost on his shoulder. He turned.

"Hello, Mr Frost. I'm Hazel Heald."

The woman was not precisely plump, but was definitely well-upholstered. Her short black hair formed a tight wavy cap on her head. In the face, she reminded Frost of no one so much as the female half of the cartoon urchins that advertised Campbell's Soup. Her round, cherubic, rosy features seemed more childlike than wom-

anly. She wore a rather dowdy ensemble of dark-blue velvet jacket and skirt.

Frost stepped backward out of the Charades circle to respond to the introduction. Finding the Heald woman initially unattractive – Frost could not help contrasting Hazel's florid looks with the delicate lines of his Elinor's never-forgotten, classically beautiful face – the writer nonetheless summoned up all his good manners and responded graciously.

"Delighted to meet you, Miss Heald. I understand you've been kind enough to express an interest in my foolish little stories."

"Please, call me Hazel. And I'll call you Robert."

Frost was a tad put off by the woman's presumption, but consented. "Very well, if you wish."

"That's so nice. Indeed, I've enjoyed everything you've ever written, Robert. And I did not find your tales to be foolish at all. Quite the contrary. And I am no mere fan. Your work has conveyed a message to me. A message about all the pain you've endured, and how this pain has enabled you, however briefly, to pierce the curtain of reality and experience the cosmic foundations. In turn, I have brought an urgent message for you."

Having no idea what to make of this disconcertingly enigmatic talk, Frost attempted a flip attitude. "If you are going to present me with some sort of bill from a cosmic creditor, you'll have to stand in line behind the mortal ones."

Hazel did not immediately respond. She merely gazed deeply into Frost's grey-blue eyes. Her own eyes, Frost noted, were entirely grey, almost bestial or Pan-like. Grey of the moss of walls were they. Now, suddenly, they captured in miniature a flare from the fireplace, and for a moment Frost reeled as if drunk. When he recovered, Hazel had taken a step away, smiling tantalizingly.

"We'll speak more of this at the party's end, Robert."

Frost returned to the gay crowd attempting to unridle the mute actions of the Charader. But he could no longer lose himself in the play. Whatever hypnotic trick that woman had played on him, the effects did not immediately evanesce.

Around midnight, the party began to wind down. By ones and twos and threes, the guests took their hearty leave of the Eddys. As the mantel clock chimed one, a seated Frost looked up from melancholy contemplation of his own gnarled hands to discover that only the Eddys and Hazel remained in the room.

Clifford approached Frost and said, "Bob, I have to confess that we've arranged this whole party just as a prelude to this moment. You see, our friend Hazel is a sensitive. She has certain talents, and she is here to put them at your disposal, for your salvation."

Frost climbed wearily to his feet. "Cliff, I have no idea what you're driving at. But I don't need any Aimee Semple McPherson preaching over me, trying to save my nonexistent immortal soul, if that's your intention."

Muriel stepped in. "Hazel's not a preacher, she's a witch."

The simple unexpected word brought Frost up short, but he rebounded rather insolently. "A witch? Can you discern the contents of locked boxes then, or make com-

mon tables rear and kick like mules, like the trained performers of the Society for Psychical Research?"

Hazel did not seem affronted by Frost's disbelief. "No. But I can speak to the dead."

Frost collapsed nervelessly back into his chair. He gripped his hair with both hands and tugged harshly, as if to lift off the top of his head. "Now this has passed into sheer cruelty. You're planting your boot in the face of a drowning man! Clifford, Muriel, you're both false friends –"

Muriel hastened to Frost's side. "No, Bob, we're not! We only have your best interests at heart. This is a chance you have to take, if you ever want to heal yourself. Let Hazel open up a conduit to the afterlife for you, and perhaps you'll hear something that will help you. Please, Bob, try to approach this with the innocence of a child."

This last phrase triggered long-buried memories in Frost.

He had been seven years old when he had experienced his first instance of clairvoyance. The actual object of his visionary glimpse was forgotten. But something had brushed across his mind whose source he would never find. He easily recalled, however, how the incident had upset him. He ran to the skirts of his beloved mother, Belle, and tearfully disclosed everything to her. Amazingly, she had not been surprised. Belle was a Swedenborgian, follower of a faith that easily accommodated such visions. She had soothed her son, and actually made him relish the thought of such preternatural extensions of his senses. Thereafter, he had welcomed any and all eruptions of the uncanny into his life. Indeed, many times while composing his poetry Frost had felt himself to be taking dictation from some extramundane source.

But of course all such numinous access had vanished twelve years ago, when the flaring, fleeing demon had reared up at him from the pyre of his dreams. Composition of his paltry stories never involved any heavenly hand guiding his pen.

Frost released his madman's grip on his scalp and looked up at the three faces regarding him. The visages of the Eddys manifested only sincere concern, while Hazel radiated an assured and almost beatific good humour. Had Hazel urged him on then, Frost's contrary nature would have made him refuse her help. But her serene silence had the desired effect.

Frost's voice was small but determined. "Show me whatever spirits you can, then."

The four assembled around the kitchen table, the room illuminated only by a single candle centred on a cracked plate atop the table. Hazel said, "Please join hands." One of her own sought Frost's, and he accepted it. Hazel's small hand was a hot coal melting into the snowbank of his own.

There followed no incantations or mummary, no incense or convenient distractions that would allow trickery. Hazel simply closed her eyes, while her breathing fell into a deep cadence. Frost felt his own breath slowing to match hers. But then, as if a galvanic current had passed through her, Hazel gave a spastic jerk and her eyes flew open.

And when she spoke, it was with Elinor's immemorial voice.

"Bob, I fear you are doing poorly without me."

Frost felt tears leaking from his eyes. He fervently

wanted to believe he was actually talking to Elinor's shade. But a residue of doubt afflicted him.

"Elinor – if it is you, then tell me what gift I gave you when I visited you at school in 1894."

"I could never forget, Bob. It was that unique little book you had printed. Only two copies ever existed. One for me and one for you. *Twilight*, you titled it."

Frost felt simultaneously hollowed out and filled with some nameless glowing substance. "Dearest Elinor, yes, yes, it's true! Since you were taken from me, I have been not a man at all, but just a shambling husk. Oh, why did such a tragedy ever have to befall us?"

Elinor's voice issuing from Hazel's lips was calm. "We can't know such things, Bob, even after death. The universe splits and branches every instant, and whatever path we find ourselves on is our destiny."

"Are you and – are you and the children happy, Elinor?"

"Yes, Bob, very happy. And I wish I could share our bliss with you. But I suspect that simply talking to me will not accomplish any long-lasting transformation of your heart. After we say goodbye, you'll begin to waver and doubt the events of this evening. You've always been such a sceptic, Bob. Only the things you could touch or handle would convince you entirely. Or, what would be worse, you'll set me up as some kind of lofty angel, and continue to martyr yourself to my memory. No, Bob, my voice alone cannot offer you the sure path out of your misery. For that, you must seek out the Nevernaught. Goodbye, Bob. I love you."

"Elinor, don't go! I love you too!" Frost jumped up, breaking the handclasp, as if to fly down unseen dimensions after the departing shade.

Hazel blinked then, and spoke in her natural voice. "What happened? Was contact made?"

Muriel recounted what had transpired during the séance. Hazel considered carefully the matter carefully before offering her response.

"I know where the Nevernaught is to be found. Or, at least, where conditions are propitious for a meeting. Robert, will you come with me?"

Frost knuckled his overflowing eyes. "Of course. What choice do I have?"

March 29th dawned lush and welcoming. Birds twittered, pockets of remnant snow hidden on northward slopes gleefully co-operated with the sun toward their own dissolution, and a bustling, grateful, shirt-sleeve humanity reclaimed the sidewalks of East Providence. The winter seemed truly to have fled.

At the Eddys' early breakfast table, Frost and Hazel shared the family repast of johnnycakes and bacon. Both visitors had slept over at Second Street after the séance ended. Hazel had bunked with the children, while Frost sprawled across the horsehide sofa, so exhausted by all that had happened as to be oblivious to its protruding springs. Now, considerably rumped, Frost focused on imbibing his third cup of coffee, seeking to concentrate his mind. The conversation with Elinor's ghost, the odd injunction she had laid upon him, the sense of his life teetering on some precipice – all these issues preoccupied him.

Nonetheless, he remained observant enough to take note of Hazel's attitude and behaviour, since so much rested on this stranger's character. In contrast with Frost's dishevelled state, Hazel appeared as neat, if dowdy, as she had last night. She had enjoyed a hearty breakfast with ladylike gusto, while chatting amiably with the children. Flora seemed particularly taken with her, laughing at her nonsensical chatter. The medium – the witch – seemed an uncomplicated person. But Frost suspected that, like any square yard of simple forest soil, she concealed an entire sophisticated and alien civilization beneath her surface.

At 9.30 the Eddys began to make ready to attend church. Soon the family and their guests stood at the front gate, ready to go their separate ways.

Hazel patted the heads of the children. Al and Mel's normally unruly hair had been brilliantined flat. "Enjoy the services, Muriel. Robert and I are heading for our own sort of natural chapel."

Clifford tilted back his fedora and clapped Frost on his shoulder. "You're in good hands, Bob. I expect that when we next see you, you'll be feeling considerably more chipper."

In the sober light of day, Frost experienced some doubts about the wisdom of committing himself to the hands of this unknown witch. "Such an outcome of this haring about after spooks would be a welcome surprise. But I'm not counting on it."

Muriel said, "Robert Frost, such a defeatist attitude is hardly likely to merit success." She stood on tiptoes and kissed Frost's stubbly cheek.

Then the Eddys departed.

Frost turned to Hazel. "Exactly where are we heading, to meet this 'Nevernaught?'"

"Why, Robert, only to someplace you've already exhibited an affinity for. The Dark Swamp."

Frost jolted backward. Hazel's comment struck deep into his memories, hitting one of the most tumultuous periods in his life.

Shortly after the 20-year-old Frost had poured out his heart to Elinor, gifting her with that copy of *Twilight*, he had received intelligence that caused him to believe that she had spurned his gift, rejected his soul-offering, and that she had pledged her hand to a rival. Plunged into black despair, Frost had conceived of only one possible retreat that would match the anguish of his being: North Carolina's Dismal Swamp. A legendary haunt of melancholy, affirmed as the recourse of heartstricken lovers by many of Frost's heroes, such as Longfellow and Thomas Moore, the Dismal Swamp seemed the only fitting abode wherein to nurse his wounds – or extinguish his very consciousness.

By train and steamer he made his way to the boggy wasteland. Hurling himself on foot into its darkling interior, still clad in his unsuitable streetclothes, Frost had battled briars and vines and sinkholes for ten miles, until darkness fell. Just on the point of casting himself into the marsh's peaty waters, he had stumbled upon a party of duck-hunters. Suddenly, human company appeared precious to him, and his mood began to lift. Over the next few days, he experienced various misadventures back in the South's small towns, which culminated in humbly

wiring his mother for train fare home.

But how could Hazel know any of this? Perhaps her remark had merely referred symbolically to some aspect of his personality she divined. Frost chose for the moment not to interrogate her on this point.

"Yes, I suppose my stories have exhibited an affinity for the nighted places of the earth. But are you speaking literally?"

"Yes, I am. We need to ride a trolley to the village of Chepachet, to visit its Dark Swamp."

Vague memories of conversations with Lovecraft on various Rhode Island locales rumoured to possess supernatural qualities now returned to Frost. "I believe I've heard of this locus of mystery. All right, then, let's catch a ride downtown, to Exchange Place."

As they strolled toward the East Providence trolley stop, Frost sought to learn more about his companion. Hazel needed little prompting to talk about herself.

"I'm 38. No special male friends, but plenty of chums of both sexes in the amateur-press world. I enjoy writing, but have commenced to suspect that I have little talent for it. I live in the same town I was born in, with my widowed mother. It was she who helped me become a witch, for it's an old family calling among the Heald women. But I'm only a pauper witch, not inclined to feather my own nest with my skills. Not do I indulge in any kind of repellant or malicious work, such as milking bats or riding bony old men naked through the night. I prefer to use my abilities to help people. People who deserve it. Such as yourself, Robert."

Frost was silent. Hazel's easy candour had disarmed him. She seemed utterly open and aboveboard, yet remarkably unshallow. There were depths to this woman not yet apparent.

They boarded the first trolley to stop for them and rode west, crossing the sparkling Seekonk River. In the centre of Providence they transferred to the Chepachet-bound car, settling down for an hour's trip.

Their conversation turned to abstract literary matters, and Frost found Hazel to be a well-informed devotee of the arts. The ride into the state's northwestern rural domains proved congenial and passed swiftly. Before Frost quite expected it, they were disembarking in Chepachet Village.

The heartening sunlight fell upon a rambling, well-tended cemetery that climbed a hillside. Small stores lined a quarter-mile stretch of the main road, known as the Putnam Pike, which, if followed further, would lead all the way to Hartford, Connecticut. The several private homes that could be seen appeared wholesome and well-maintained.

"Well, what next?" Frost inquired, as they stood in front of a farrier's, shuttered and quiet on the Sabbath.

"Let's inquire at this tavern."

Frost asked Hazel to wait outside, leery of the potentially bawdy atmosphere inside the dining establishment. But to his surprise, he found the Stage Coach Tavern to be a reputable place, just gearing up for the lunchtime trade. Frost buttonholed a portly elderly woman pol-

ishing silverware, and soon had directions. Moreover, he managed to secure a sack lunch for the two of them, spending his last 50 cents. He hoped Hazel could supply car fare back to the city.

He hoped that after his hegira into the Dark Swamp he would be in any condition to ride home.

Rejoining Hazel, Frost said, "We need to seek out the property of a farmer named Ernest Law. It's a mile further down the road."

"Let's get walking then! There's no more splendid recreation on such a fine day!"

Hazel's sentiments pleased Frost, and he offered the woman his arm, at least for their promenade through town, where the sidewalks allowed them to walk abreast.

When they reached the outskirts of the village, where only fields and forests and the isolated homestead greeted their gaze, Frost dug out the paper-wrapped roast-beef sandwiches supplied by the tavern and shared them with Hazel. Two large pickles spiced the meal. They ate as they walked down the muddy, gravel-strewn road, conversation temporarily abandoned. Hardly had they finished their apples – a bit mealy, after a long winter in storage – when a rutted, weedy side-track appeared.

"This must be the Law farm," Frost ventured. "Their road appears little travelled. I take it the Dark Swamp is not a popular destination."

Hazel said, "The road less travelled always offers vaster prospects than the high road. Never hesitate to venture down such paths, Robert."

Frost bristled. "I wasn't hesitating, woman! Let's move on!"

They turned and followed the track that bent its way through the undergrowth.

After perhaps half a mile, they caught sight of what was presumably the Law farm: an unpainted, weather-silvered, one-story residence in poor repair, nursed by various outbuildings of equal shabbiness. Moving across the sumac-invaded lawn, Frost and Hazel reached the shoddy steps. Soon Frost was knocking at the door.

When the door swung open, it revealed a bony woman with a careworn yet friendly face, her checked housedress faded and much-mended. "Yes? How may I help you?"

"Mrs Law?" Frost inquired. "We're visitors from Providence who are keen to see the Dark Swamp. We understand that at least a portion of it extends across your property."

The woman regarded Frost and Hazel as if they had recently escaped from some sanatorium. "That worthless blotch of land does indeed intrude on our property. Why anyone in his right mind would want to dally there is beyond me. But if you continue to follow the track until you pass the last cornfield, you'll come directly to it. You'll have to excuse me now. I'd offer you some refreshment, but we've just today had a death in the family. It's our hired man, and we are busy trying to arrange a home burial."

"Oh, please, pardon us –" began Frost. But before he could finish his apology he was talking to a closed door.

Leaving the sad-aspected house behind, Frost said glumly to Hazel, "Sorrow is the one constant in every human life."

"Is it, Robert?" was her reply. "Remember that happiness makes up in height what it lacks in breadth."

Past the tattered detritus of last year's harvest the pilgrims moved. Some distance off, a line of crooked trees betokened the border of the Dark Swamp. Frost felt impelled to ask Hazel a question.

"Hazel, exactly what is this Nevernaught from whom I am supposed to derive some solace?"

"The Nevernaught itself will reveal as much of its nature to you as you can handle, Robert. For now, let's just say that you will never meet any being of larger capacities."

Frost harumphed. "I suppose I'll have to be content with such mystical formulations until the moment of truth, if any."

Hazel stopped, and Frost perforce did likewise. They were adjacent to a low stone wall, partly tumbled, lichen-crusted boulders scattered like the heads of decapitated warriors.

"I feel you are beginning to doubt the reality of that which we seek, Robert. Allow me to show you something of the unfathomed nature of existence."

Hazel stooped and knocked on the nearest boulder.

"Stonebear, stonebear, show yourself!"

The first response to Hazel's invocation was a rumbling underfoot. Frost distinctly felt the ground quiver. Then, at the foot of the wall, soil began to boil. A blocky furred head pushed up into the air, soon followed by the creature's body. Its emergence sent another section of the wall cascading down.

The stonebear was as large as a small child. Its head resembled that of a walrus, with shorter tusks, while its mud-coated tawny body reminded Frost of a woodchuck's – with feet like curved shovel blades.

Ignoring the humans, the stonebear began powerfully pawing the upper courses of the wall down until Hazel said, "Enough! Begone!"

The anomalous creature immediately dived back down its hole like a seal entering the water.

Hazel regarded the gape-mouthed Frost with a wry smile. "The stonebears are the guardians of the earth's rocks. They spend their days moving stones about underground, for reasons no one's ever quite understood. But I assume their behaviour aids the maternal earth in some fashion. The stonebears resent the human use of their flinty charges for walls, and will knock down any wall that's not protected by a local witch. Any town whose stone walls are succumbing to something which does not love them, is a town bereft of its witch."

Frost finally found his voice. "Farmer Law has his wall-mending cut out for him now, thanks to my doubts. Best we move on before my scepticism causes our host any more labour."

Before much longer, Frost and Hazel attained the line of arthritic trees, realizing that it indeed marked the marge of the Dark Swamp. The land beyond this border was not immediately sodden and impassable, but seemed to transition gradually from solidity, insofar as their vision could penetrate the marsh. Skunk cabbages flared bright green. A footpath led off across various tussocks and ridges.

"Follow me," said Hazel, and Frost did.

They moved deeper into the Dark Swamp, leaving behind daylight and certainty of footing. Even without foliage, the trees of the Dark Swamp seemed to occlude the sunlight. The ground grew squishy under Frost's soles.

After some indeterminate time that seemed eons (yet the sun never moved from its perch directly above their heads), Frost was on the point of asking how much further they had to traverse this cloistered dankness when Hazel called a halt.

They had reached a sizable island in the bog. Astonishingly, the island was covered with premature flowers, well in advance of any such colourful carpet in the outer world. But these were not wild blooms, but rather a remnant of some lost garden, mostly simple tulips and daffodils. Realizing this, Frost noticed that the middle of the island featured a roughly rectangular gap in the flowers. He advanced cautiously toward the irregularity.

The gap was a cellar hole. Here at one time had stood a house. Now the only trace of the structure was a slope-side declivity. In one corner of the cellar hole, three or four moss-furred stairs descended nowhere.

Frost suddenly experienced the cellar hole as an empty eye-socket in the earth, somehow still able to pin him with an inhuman stare.

Hazel broke Frost's fascination with the cellar hole by speaking. "Here in a simple cottage for uncounted millennia lived an unchanging member of an ancient race, the last survivor of a dawn people, those who furnished Adam's sons with wives. He was the guardian of the Dark Swamp and its secrets. But in this new benighted age we inhabit, when God seems perpetually on the verge of saying for the final time, 'Put out the light,' the guardian has moved on. Too few seekers come this way any more to sustain him."

"He – this guardian – he is not the Nevernaught?"

"No. The Nevernaught is another. Let us inform that being now that you wish an audience."

Hazel knelt among the flowers, and Frost mimicked her without knowing why. Hazel placed her lips against the golden bell of a daffodil. "Nevernaught, I bring you one who inquires after answers to the questions and doubts that plague him. Can he see you?" Hazel shifted her ear to the mouth of the flower. She listened for a moment, then bade Frost do the same.

Frost bumped the daffodil with his hairy ear. Perfume enveloped him.

From the fragile trumpet whispered the single word, repeated: "Come, come, come..."

Frost regained his feet. He hardly knew whether he was standing or still kneeling, whether it was night or day.

Hazel guided Frost to the edge of the cellar hole. "You must go down."

Frost turned an imploring face to Hazel. "You'll come with me?"

Hazel smiled, and Frost felt a faint surge of confidence. "Not today."

Frost's shoulders slumped. But then, resigned to the exclusionary nature of his quest, he set his foot upon the first step.

It took 13 impossible steps for daylight to vanish entirely. Frost never looked back, but fancied he would have seen a dwindling, green-edged square of light with perhaps Hazel's head framed therein.

In his descent, Frost recalled for the first time in many years the shunned fate of his sister Jeanie. Always mentally unstable, she had been committed by relatives in 1920 to the State Hospital in Augusta, Maine, without Frost's intercession one way or the other. Once very close to Jeanie, Frost had never visited her in her confinement. Frost's guilt had burdened him since. Now he wondered if the hereditary madness of his father that had claimed Jeanie was devouring him as well.

Without choice, whether mad or not, Frost continued his descent. Each step seemed to abase his spirit further.

At last he reached the final step, stumbling upon the one that wasn't there. In what seemed to be a corridor of woe, he continued onward.

Ahead of him a pale shimmering began to register on his straining eyes. Was it a tiny will-o-the-wisp floating in a crypt? Or a galaxy revolving against the backdrop of interstellar space?

Frost slowed his pace and began to shuffle cautiously. And well he did. For his extended left foot eventually met thin air. Frost stopped at the edge of the abyss. A cosmic breeze seemed to stroke his face, chill yet not unpleasant.

The shimmering still tantalized his light-starved eyes. One moment it seemed a spinning nebula, lazily across the heavens. The next it seemed a pocket-sized ghost. Occasionally it resolved into an androgynous human face blending all races into one, yet with disturbing echoes of the visages of both Elinor and himself.

As Frost struggled to fix the nature of the being, it spoke – it sang! – pulsing visibly with each silent word that seemed to echo directly in Frost's brain.

Nevernaught, nevernaught. There was never naught, there was always thought. Thought and afterthought.

"What – what manner of thing are you?"

I am the tree of all that will ever be.

"Are you God?"

One and complete, unified yet discrete. Conflict and peace, the Thing of things. From hydrogen all the way to man. Less in the present than in the future, and less in both together than in the past.

Frost realized that the riddle of this entity's nature was beside the point, if it could heal him.

"Nevernaught, the shade of my wife counselled me to seek your help. Can you show me what I need to see, to go on living?"

Out of coming-in, into having been! said the Nevernaught, then flared nova-bright.

Frost hurled his arm up to block the searing light. When the stabbing radiance finally died away, Frost opened his eyes.

Below him spun the planet Earth, a cloud-stroked, continent-marbled orb. Frost clutched his throat, bicycled his feet for purchase, flailed for anything to grip. But when he found he continued to breathe easily and was not falling, he ceased his gyrations.

As Frost watched, he realized that his vision was

enlarging. While retaining his orbital perspective, holding the planet entire in his mind, he simultaneously began to apprehend surface details of the globe. Wild herds in Africa, swarming cities in Europe, the jungles of South America. The immensity and variety of life overwhelmed him with sensations of appreciation and gratitude and delight. Never before had he truly savoured the miracle of his world's existence.

But at the height of his joy, a transformation began. Half the Earth began to ice over. The other hemisphere began to burn. Ice and flame raced to meet at the terminator. Frost seemed to hear the dying screams of all creation, as billions of entities crisped or shattered.

When the opposing forces met, the Earth instantly vanished, as did the attendant stars.

Now Frost was left in some featureless desert place, a zone with no expression and nothing to express. He could hardly grasp the death of the Earth he had just witnessed, so blank was this new environment. It was as if all the beauty he had been savouring had been just a painting on the stretched skin of a balloon which, once pricked, became less than nothing.

Time trickled by. Or did not. But there came a moment when Frost reached a new understanding.

This desert place was inside him. He was viewing the emptiness within himself, the emptiness that had been incipient in him, but only fully born the night he lost everything he loved in flames.

Frost began to weep. What a cruel fate, to carry around such a vacuum. Why could he not be populated with sustaining hopes and dreams and beacons of affection as other men were? Were such helpful bastions of mortal existence any more false or inaccurate than this ghastly nothingness?

Even before the thought was completed, the voice of the Nevernaught returned.

Men dance round in a ring and suppose, but the Secret sits in the middle and knows!

Now Frost's inner desert began to change.

Flowers thrust out of the featureless medium. Tulips and daffodils –

Frost lay upon his back on the abnormally warm ground of the island, flowers nodding around his body. Hazel bent over him, soothing his brow.

Frost found her hand and clutched it. Even as he spoke, his vision of the Nevernaught and what it had showed him was fading. But what remained behind was a certainty of purpose and a calmness of heart he had not felt in a dozen years.

"Hazel, I had a glimpse, a glimpse of something wonderful –"

Hazel's smile held both sadness and delight. "Yes, Robert, that's the most any of us ever have."

Frost was on the point of leaving his room to meet Hazel. The month was June, the year 1925, and they were heading to New York by train. Frost gathered up his luggage, which included a string-wrapped manuscript bearing the title *A Boy's Will*.

On the doorstep, he encountered the mailman.

"Mr Frost, just one for you today."

Frost accepted the envelope. It bore the return address for *Weird Tales*.

Dear Grampa Jack,

Weh-hell, I swan! Such a startling career turnaround Uncle Theobald has never seen in all his advanced years! From spinner of supernatural shiver-makers to a certified poetaster! The imminent publication of your debut volume of verses is an occasion much to be celebrated, save by all those devotees of the occult yarn, who are losing one of the finest talents ever to grace our small field. I suppose I'll just have to fill my empty pages with more stories from old Cluffy. Providencians forever! But don't let all the attention from those Eastern literary nabobs get your head in a whirl! It's as easy to go down as to rise up, and such fawning litterateurs can be damn fickle. But Grampa Jack has a firm head on his shoulders, and certainly knows that he has a home to return to in the pages of *Weird Tales*, should fortune ever turn his feet our way again.

But even this news pales in the light of your upcoming wedding to the inestimable Miss Heald! Please give all my regards to your talented fiancée. If half the hints about her character which you've dropped are true, then she's some catch! A veritable daughter of Endor. I know that married life will shore you up in any future moments of trial, just as it has yours truly. Why, my ol' battlewagon even has her Uncle Theobald

making regular visits to a general practitioner now! I'll attain Methuselah's years with such healthy ways!

Please endeavour to remain in touch with your sincere friend,

Howard P. Lovecraft

Frost smiled, and tucked the letter into the pocket of his jacket. Hazel would appreciate reading it. Leaving stoop for sidewalk, he began to whistle.

Halfway to the train station, a couplet occurred to him, and he stopped to jot it down in his notebook.

*Love has earth to which she clings,
But thought has a pair of dauntless wings.*

Paul Di Filippo lives – where else? – in Providence, Rhode Island, and his most recent solo stories here were "Singing Each to Each" (IZ 155), "Return to Cockaigne" (IZ 163), "Babylon Sisters" (IZ 168), "What Goes Up a Chimney? Smoke!" (IZ 177) and "Bare Market" (issue 185). His recent books include the novel *A Mouthful of Tongues: Her Totipotent Tropicandia*, the novella *A Year in the Linear City* (nominated for a Hugo Award), and the collection *Babylon Sisters and Other Posthumans* – all three published in 2002 – and the novel *Fuzzy Dice*, recently out from PS Publishing.

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Barking Mad

Ian Watson

"...a story for which the world is not yet prepared."

– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Late the night before, after he returned from the John Radcliffe Hospital, Webb had cut off the left sleeve of his shirt at the shoulder with scissors, likewise of his jacket using a carpet knife, and he had slit both garments down under the armpit, otherwise when getting dressed in the morning he wouldn't have been able to accommodate the dog's head.

The result was bizarre: one bare white arm – with Skipper's head protruding from Webb's biceps – in contrast to the majority of the grey suit and striped dark blue shirt (and lighter blue tie). Looked as if he was raising money for charity, like somebody who shaves off one side of their beard. However, Webb could hardly arrive at the headquarters of Thames Valley Police dressed in a baggy short-sleeved T-shirt, even if he owned such an informal item of attire as a T-shirt.

Steering his bright yellow Triumph Stag from his flat in North Oxford out to Kidlington posed no problems other than the usual morning traffic congestion.

Supposing Skipper's head had been on Webb's forearm, rather than on his upper arm, gear changes could have proved perilous – the dog's whiskery muzzle might have lunged at the steering wheel.

"*Cave canem*," Webb said to himself in Latin. Beware of the dog.

Unused to being transported in such a fashion, Skipper barked noisily at other cars, so Webb kept the window up despite the considerable warmth of the "flaming" June morning. He also turned up the volume of Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*. Most drivers probably thought that a complete animal was in the front of the Stag, which would mean that Webb was driving without due care and attention. But soon enough the Stag was entering the yard of the three-storey office block, radio mast on its roof, where the space marked Detective Chief Inspector awaited, empty.

Why should it have been otherwise than empty?

Because, as Webb realized just then, when he finally got off to sleep the night before he had dreamed of finding that space occupied by... a dog warden van, one of the D-Entity aliens sitting awkwardly at the wheel.

Which of course made perfect sense. The aliens had reacted to Webb investigating the death of one of their species by hampering him uniquely as well as doling out a mischievous, mocking punishment. However, Webb was used to influential persons and groups trying to throw their weight around.

"A murder is *still* a murder," Webb had insisted to Chief Superintendent Turtle late the previous afternoon, "whether the victim is a Lord or a layabout or a visiting alien! And murder is against the law."

"Ah," the lugubrious though indulgent Turtle had said, "but does the law apply to an alien in the same way that it applies to a human being? I mean, you could hardly murder a chimpanzee, and chimps are supposed to be very like us – much more so than a freakish D-Entity." And Turtle had dipped a chocolate biscuit into his tea.

"We have a corpse, sir!"

"Hmm," said the Chief Superintendent, "that's true." By now the body should be at the mortuary in the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology on South Parks Road.

"*Habeo corpus*, in a manner of speaking."

"Isn't the phrase *habeas corpus*?"

Webb had sighed exasperatedly. "*Habeo* is the first-person singular of the verb. *I have the body*."

Turtle eyed Webb. "We can't all have the benefits of a classical education. That's the trouble."

"A classical education is a *drawback*, sir?"

"No, having the body is the trouble. If you hadn't insisted, the aliens might have withdrawn the body – from our world and certainly from our jurisdiction. I wonder what the word for homicide of an alien is."

"Obviously xenocide, from *xenos*, a stranger."

"Ah, but is xenocide on the statute book?"

"Xenophobia should be. One across in yesterday's *Times* crossword. Sir, a crime was committed on our patch."

"So what was one down?"

"Xylophone."

Just then, the phone had rung. Someone at the Home Office felt that MI5 rather than Thames Valley Police should be in charge of any investigation. The death of an alien might become a matter of national security.

"There are procedures," Turtle informed the caller.

"And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!"

– Shakespeare

"Drawbacks," Turtle said today as he eyed the dog on Webb's bare arm. "A very visible obstacle to you remaining in charge of this case."

Skipper yapped a couple of time.

"Audible too." After a moment's thought Turtle held out a chocolate biscuit, then quickly he withdrew his offering.

"Can it eat? I mean, where does the food go? I wouldn't want biscuit all over the carpet."

Webb explained that it would seem that the bulk of Skipper's body had been shifted into another dimension; otherwise there would be no lungs to bark with, nor any way to swallow dog food.

"His head isn't grafted into my bloodstream – that isn't how oxygen gets to his brain. The doc at the John Radcliffe proved that last night by an X-ray."

And a surgeon at the JR had offered to perform an amputation. Even more doctors might have come flocking as word of Webb's predicament spread round the hospital if it hadn't been near to midnight by then. Obviously a decapitation would have killed Skipper, and Webb *liked* the dog.

Skipper was a miniature Schnautzer, 14 inches high at the shoulder, if shoulders had been visible. Squarely built in the Terrier style, with a hard wiry coat of pepper and salt, although this also now largely eluded observation. The whiskery muzzle and bushy eyebrows conveyed an air of curmudgeonly disapproval suggestive of a bygone officer of Hussars, a demeanour that appealed to Webb.

Schnautzers of larger size had been used in the German-speaking countries as police-dogs and watch-dogs, but as companions too. Initially Webb had been appalled two Christmases previously when Sergeant Harris presented him with the half-grown miniature Schnautzer puppy – "from me and the missus and in case you can't think of a name she reckons Skipper's a nifty one" – along with a car sticker to the effect that a dog is for life. Of course Webb had promptly thrown the car sticker away. No such nonsense would deface his Triumph Stag, 175,000 miles old and still capable of a blood-curdling roar. He could hardly do likewise with the dog. Throw it away. Damn Harris's banal, if well-meant, impertinence.

"What if the beast chews the legs off my nest of Chipendale tables or barks during Mozart?" Webb had remonstrated at the time.

"You train Skipper, sir. Gives you something to do."

"Train him to do *what*? To skip? I have plenty to do! I

have those new CDs of *The Ring* to listen to."

Surprisingly soon, Skipper had endeared himself to Webb, although he would hardly admit it. The most he would allow was that at least a dog wasn't a human being.

"Imagine having a human being share my flat!" Webb had expostulated a few months later.

"Not even a female human being, sir, just for a while?"

"What, and have underwear everywhere? That's sort of thing's best handled at a fine hotel."

Live with a woman? How could he avoid her finding out his first name? *Wellington* Webb. Shortened at school long ago to *Welly*, as though he was a rubber boot. Drat his father's devotion to the Duke of Wellington and all those accounts of the Peninsular Campaign and Waterloo, as though Webb senior had been there personally.

"So your pet is fouling in that other dimension," Turtle said fastidiously. "I really should take you off the case..."

"In case the aliens have no-fouling rules?"

"Because having a dog attached to you makes you a bit defective as a detective. Suppose you're doing surveillance, and it barks?"

"Uniform can do surveillance. What I do is *think*."

"But, I was going to say, since you're so closely connected we'll give it a couple more days – see how functional you are."

"Morning, sir." That eager, gormless smile. Perspiration gleamed on the Sergeant's face.

"I *know* that it's morning, Harris."

"It's good to see Skipper alive, sir. In a manner of speaking."

"Is it? So what do we *have*, man? What facts?"

Harris consulted the file in his hands.

"Well, sir, while you were at the hospital uniform knocked on all the doors around you even though it was very late and Ah visited your neighbour upstairs."

"Mrs Endlicott? She's barmy."

"Barking mad, Ah'd say. Except rightly that might apply to you at the moment."

"I may be extremely peeved, Harris, but I am definitely not barking."

When Skipper obliged with a yap, the Sergeant did his best to smother a grin.

"Tell me, Harris, is everyone laughing at me behind my back?"

"Of course not, sir. Everyone is very sympathetic. The missus was horrified."

"Sympathy," growled Webb. "Is there a feeling that Webb has bitten off more than he can chew?"

"It's the first case we've had involving aliens, sir. Ah mean, apart from Iraqis and Bosnians. Anyhow, Mrs Endlicott –"

"Harris, I am not mainly interested in the assault on my person, and on my dog, but in the *murder*. This" – Webb brandished his bare arm and Skipper – "is meant to distract me."

"Just listen a mo, sir. Mrs Endlicott says that a monster drifted down from just under her ceiling to just above her floor then vanished. Obviously she means an alien. She had hysterics. Presumably they were looking for you

but weren't sure exactly where. Anyway, that tells us one thing: they can't just pass through floors or walls. They have to phase out and phase in again."

The night before, Webb had been nursing a glass of a good Rioja and listening to *Così Fan Tutti* when ferocious barks erupted, only to be cut short. Almost at once a D-Entity had appeared beside Webb, seized his left arm, torn his shirt sleeve open. Moments later Skipper's head was jutting from his bare biceps, barking frantically again – and the D-Entity had vanished. Doubtless two intruders had been involved, one to seize Skipper, drag him elsewhere then reinsert him partially from the other side. Attempting to calm the frantic head, Webb had lurched disbelievingly to the phone, his wine spilled, Mozart ruined.

"Phase, Harris?"

"The kids watch *Star Trek*, sir."

"So what were they relying on, to locate me? Can hardly have been the phone book. I'm listed as ground floor."

"Maybe your smell, sir, or your vibrations."

"Harris, I shower every morning. Look, I need a coffee."

"Let me fetch you one, sir."

"Not the swill they serve here, Harris! We'll drive down to Little Clarendon Street. That's near enough to the crime scene. Café Rouge do a decent espresso."

"You and your coffees!"

"Afterwards we'll stroll down St Giles to Balliol and get on investigating."

"X marks the spot."

"What are you talking about, Harris?"

"That metal cross in the middle of the road outside Balliol College – to show where the martyrs were burned at the stake. Martyrs Memorial round the corner isn't actually where they were burned."

"I know that, Harris. Where *who* were burned, exactly?"

"Them. The martyrs."

"Names, Harris. *Names*."

"Um," said the Sergeant.

Webb consulted his watch, located on his wrist approximately 18 inches below Skipper's snout. Among other things Schnautzers were watch-dogs.

"How soon till we know the post-mortem results?" Webb demanded.

"The pathologist says she'll be on to it just as soon as a vet gets to the School of Pathology from the Cotswold Wildlife Park at Burford. That's in case the vet has any tips about alien life-forms. A vet has to operate on snakes and tortoises and all sorts of things. The organs might look different."

"How do you operate on a tortoise, Harris? Saw it open, then superglue it afterwards?"

"Ah imagine you use keyhole surgery."

"It is quite a three-pipe problem."

– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

The Dons of Balliol and the Master had taken the alien visitation in their stride, since everyone in Oxford, town and gown alike, knew that Oxford was the centre of the universe, and of all Oxford colleges – although this might

be disputed – Balliol claimed effortless superiority, even if its present buildings mostly dated from the 19th century. Not for nothing had Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893) declared epigrammatically:

I am the Master of this College.

What I don't know is not knowledge.

Besides, Balliol men (and women too now, reflected Webb) always infested any government, Tory or Labour alike, and the college's economics and other Dons were advisors to Whitehall, consequently the alien manifestation in the Senior Common Room was almost akin to an official visit. What's more, Balliol traditionally embraced chaps of every race. When Webb had been an undergraduate these many long years ago – although at St John's College next door to Balliol – he well recalled visiting the Scala cinema in Headington in the company of a buxom nurse, whom he nursed hopes of fondling, to see a film wherein Tarzan swam mightily to escape from a canoe of black heathen savages, and when the latter reached the shore a roar went up from the cinema audience: "Well rowed, Balliol!"

Webb reflected on this, and on the alien advent, as he and Harris sat in smart Café Rouge, while bicycles passed by along the narrow street of smart shops including Tumi which specialized in South American craftwork such as rugs and ocarinas and retablos and woolly hats and ethnic trinkets and stout, primitive furniture. A ceiling fan lazily churned the air. Harris sipped discontentedly at a tea which no one could stand a spoon upright in. The menu spurned decent egg and chips in favour of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon in a bagel. Webb's pride and joy was parked further down on broad pavement. Since all the traffic wardens knew the Detective Chief Inspector's yellow Triumph Stag and obviously he must be on duty he wouldn't get a ticket.

The waiter had served Webb and Harris with a fair degree of aplomb; after all, this was Oxford. Besides which, many of the staff in Oxford's coffee bars were familiar with Webb, although not to the point of familiarity due to his irascible tendency. The young chap had even asked if the dog would like a bowl of water, an offer which Webb declined since the waiter might place the bowl on the floor, requiring Webb to stoop over.

Webb said to Harris, "Remind me of the exact words that Physics chap reported."

Harris consulted his notebook.

"One of the aliens said to the Jervis-Smith Fellow and Tutor in Physics, Hugh Dermot Kemp: 'We phase from other-region, displaying.' Unquote. In other words showing themselves to us."

"A peacock *displays*, Harris. They might have been showing off to each other. Hence animosity, hence the murder. Convenient of them to speak English. After a fashion."

"Aliens all do that on TV, sir. It's something to do with our own broadcasts reaching the stars during the past 50 years."

"Not to mention reaching another dimension."

"Maybe the D-Entities have been peeping at us for

yonks, sort of like pushing up a periscope from their, er, region into ours. They decided to put in a personal appearance at last."

"So one of them takes advantage of being off their home patch by murdering another one." Webb sighed. "I doubt it was Kemp who tipped off the press, or he'd have chosen a catchier name for the aliens. D-Entities is a bit of a jaw-breaker."

"Measured out my life with coffee spoons..."

— T. S. Eliot

What had happened the afternoon before around 3.30 was that Webb and Harris were sitting in the branch of Costa Coffee at the rear of the huge, two-storey Borders bookshop opposite St Mary Magdalen, nicknamed Mary Mags, when Webb's mobile phone stridently commenced the overture to *William Tell*. Webb despised Rossini.

The caller was Chief Superintendent Turtle.

According to what Turtle had just heard from the Chief Constable of Oxfordshire, apparently a late lunch in the hall of Balliol College, to commemorate a retirement and election to an Emeritus Fellowship, had been followed by coffee and liqueurs served in the Senior Common Room, during which reportedly a quintet of very strange beings had popped into existence. These took it in turns to make cryptic remarks in stilted English and to caper about, sometimes seeming to float rather than to tread the carpet.

The Fellows had been enthralled. From the perspectives of their respective disciplines – Physics, Theology, International Relations, Physiological Sciences, or Modern Languages, to name but a few – each fellow attempted to communicate lucidly.

After half an hour – during which the Tutor in Politics phoned someone high-placed in government, and the Tutor in Computation phoned a contact in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence – one of the creatures was seen by the Tutor in Law to point something slim, whereupon across the room a fizzling flash engulfed one of the other creatures and it promptly collapsed upon the floor – which was when the Tutor in Law phoned the Chief Constable, a close acquaintance. No messing about with phoning the police station down St Aldate's and being accused of a student prank.

Within minutes Chief Superintendent Turtle was talking to Webb, whom he presumed to be near to the afore-said college because that afternoon Webb was investigating a dead body found inside an Egyptian pharaoh's tomb in the Ashmolean Museum.

"Even if this alien nonsense is true," Turtle had said, "try not to be a prat. Movers and shakers there at Balliol. I'll ask the city police to send a Sergeant and half a dozen uniform to assist."

"That might not be necessary."

"Appearances, Webb."

Scarcely ten minutes after Webb and Harris left Borders, the Master of Balliol, Sir Anthony Wiseman – a craggy

and leonine figure – was ushering them into the Senior Common Room overlooking a lawn where undergraduates played croquet, apparently unaware as yet of what had transpired within the SCR.

Four slim, weirdly angular creatures of middle height, pink in hue, bobbed about amidst the Fellows. Each creature had two thin legs, two thin arms. The fingers were rather long. The slanted eyes in their bald ovoid heads were dark. Prim little mouths, tiny ears. Hard to tell whether they were nude or whether a pink body sleeve enveloped them – probably the latter, because their groins were so smooth.

A fifth creature lay sprawled on the carpet.

Sir Anthony beckoned to a slim brown man, and introduced the Tutor in Law, Dr Patel.

"You actually witnessed the killing, sir?"

Dr Patel described what he had seen.

Webb glanced at the nearest creature.

"Could you have seen a long finger being pointed rather than a weapon resembling a wand? Where is this weapon now?"

"Within one of them," Dr Patel said. "I have seen them delve their hands inside their bodies."

"That's perfectly true," chipped in a burly young man, who proved to be the Tutor in Physics, Dr Kemp.

"As if they have pockets in their bodies or in whatever covers them," added Patel.

"Or," said Kemp, "as if the D-Entities are putting their hands into the region they come from."

"D-Entities?" queried Webb, and that was when he was enlightened as to Kemp's professional opinion of the origin of the creatures, and a suitable name for them. Dimensional-Entities.

"Which one of them pointed the wand, or the finger?" Webb asked Patel.

"I tried to keep track, but I was distracted for a moment."

"How unfortunate. Harris, get statements. Ah, here comes uniform. Brief them."

Led by a sergeant, half a dozen constables had entered the SCR.

Webb strode over to confront one of the D-Entities.

"Excuse me, sir, I must ask you a few questions."

A strange, pink, dark-eyed face regarded him.

"Ask. Away." Was this an encouragement or a discouragement?

"One of you is dead, correct?"

"Severed and disconnected from ex-istence."

"And one of you caused this?"

"Cause. And effect."

"I'll take that for a yes. Do you people have names?"

But this was little help. What sort of names were One-Half, Two-Half, Three-Half, Four-Half, and Five-Half who lay dead? The questioning had proceeded frustratingly. The D-Entities did not seem overly troubled by the death of one of them, and had only become really agitated when Webb ordered the body to be removed to the morgue for a post-mortem.

"Not away from this-place! Away!"

"The corpse can hardly stay here on the floor," Webb pointed out. "And the cause of death must be established."

"Not away!"

"I'm sorry, One-Half, but it's unavoidable."

"Woe to you!"

Webb sighed. "I must warn you that threatening a police officer in the course of his duty is an offence."

"Woe!" And One-Half vanished.

"Look, sir!" Now the creature was amongst the croquet players and undergraduates were calling out, pointing, running. One-Half vanished and reappeared further away in the big garden-quadrangle. Then it was standing, or floating, once again in front of Webb.

"Anywhere!" it said. "In city!"

"It's trying to blackmail you, sir," said Harris, "by threatening a breach of the peace."

"Is it now?" Which firmed Webb's resolve.

But damn, it was impossible to prevent the suspects from going wherever they wished!

As Webb and Harris now strolled down St Giles, the leafy plane trees of that wide, noble avenue casting blessed shade, Webb held his left hand across his stomach, Napoleon-style, and he kept his right hand over Skipper's head as though he might be cradling the Schnautzer – perhaps to stop it from tearing off sleeves from passers-by.

After crossing at the traffic lights outside the Randolph Hotel, the two colleagues proceeded past Martyrs Memorial, modelled on an Eleanor Cross, to which Harris had eluded, then they went by the entry (*facilis descensus Averno*) to the subterranean men's public lavatory abutting upon the northern part of the graveyard of St Mary Mags on its narrow island between two roads. Passing the southerly section of the same, home to the biggest plane tree in the city centre and a Judas tree for variety, they turned left into Broad Street, dubbed by some The Broad, a name which always made Webb think of an American gangster's moll. A horde of news reporters and TV and radio people and sightseers almost blocked the street where it broadened. A hundred yards or so brought Webb and Harris to the Porter's Lodge of Balliol, numerous constables on duty outside. Maybe that should be *Porters' Lodge* – use and misuse of the apostrophe often preoccupied Webb.

As soon as a reporter from the *Oxford Mail* recognized Webb and shouted, "Chief Inspector, do you have a statement?" the rest of the crowd raised an outcry and surged, while the constables moved forward protectively. Palms outward, Webb appealed for some order and peace. As soon as people spotted Skipper's head protruding from Webb's bare arm the hubbub intensified.

"What's happened to your arm, Chief Inspector?" "Did the aliens do that to you?" "Are they dangerous?" "Are the police armed?" "What can you tell us about the sightings in the High Street?"

With as much dignity as Webb could muster, he called out: "Sirs and madams, we will be making a statement in due course. All I can say for the moment is that a violent death is being investigated."

"Have you made an arrest?" "Do you have a suspect?" "Who was the victim?"

Webb ignored all the questions apart from one:

"Is that dog a cyborg bloodhound?"

"No, it's a miniature Schnautzer. Now, if you'll excuse me –"

Two of the D-Entities were in the SCR, engaged in ambiguous talk with a number of Fellows including Kemp and a crowd of other people whom Webb did not recognize. Scientists. Government persons, perhaps. Kemp, unshaven, looked as if he had been up all night. The other two entities might be anywhere, scaring the people of Oxford, causing public panic which would not please the Chief Constable one little bit.

Webb addressed the Tutor in Physics. "So, Dr Kemp, have you any further observations to make?"

Kemp gazed at Skipper's head.

"I observe that the D-Entities have dimensionally interconnected you to a dog. This is a rather dangerous development, in my opinion."

"I shan't be intimidated."

"How will you unknot the dog?"

"I shall worry about that in due course." Edging his way through the crowd, Webb addressed the nearest D-Entity. "Which one are you?"

"Not one. Two-Half."

Webb brandished a now growling Skipper.

"I could arrest you for assault." But what police cell could hold a D-Entity? "You will remove the animal from my arm without harm to it, or to me. Is that clear?"

"Five-Half being back here."

"I have told you, there must be a post-mortem. One of you is guilty of killing Five-Half. I intend to find out which. Why are you protecting one of you?"

"One not guilty," said the entity. "Only half guilty."

Whatever that meant. Mitigating circumstances?

Even if one of the entities was arrested for murder and tried and found guilty, what sentence could be enforced? Nevertheless, this was a matter of principle.

Signs of impatience and even hostility towards Webb were apparent in the Senior Common Room. This wasn't a case where interrogation was going to help much further, but thinking might. Webb rejoined Harris.

"I think this might be a three-coffee case. How about Coffee Republic?"

Harris groaned. "Ah don't know as Ah have enough money after paying in Café Rouge."

"We'll pass a cash machine, man."

"Why can't you draw out some, sir?"

"My card's in my wallet. You know I forgot my wallet."

Before long, the two detectives were ensconced in Coffee Republic at the corner of George Street and New Inn Hall Street just up from the Apollo Theatre, addressing in Webb's case a Café Latte and in Harris's a Smoothie composed of mango and banana and kiwi, which was the closest thing to your everyday orange juice. Not a sign of egg and chips on the menu board, only things like panini with mozzarella, tomato, and basil.

"I'm missing something very obvious," Webb said.

Harris winced as he tasted the Smoothie. "Would that be your sleeve, sir?"

Skipper emitted a doleful yap, and Webb scratched the dog's head to hush it. Hastily the Detective Sergeant continued, "If only we could look down Skipper's gob and see right through him to the other side, we'd know what sort of place the D-Entities come from..."

Webb sat for several moments, as if thunderstruck.

"By jove, you're a genius, my old friend!"

"Maybe the docs at the John Radcliffe have a long tube with a mini-TV-camera, like they slide up your bottom to look at your intestines? But the other way round – it would go down Skipper's throat and end up coming out of his rear end."

"Don't be disgusting, Harris. Be quiet and let me think."

Webb sipped his Latte for a while, then slowly he nodded.

"Harris, I'll wager you ten pounds I can tell you the result of the post-mortem."

"That's unfair, sir, you don't have ten pounds."

"No, but I *will* if you take my wager." Webb pulled out his mobile phone. "Let's see if that vet has arrived yet. If so, we're going over to South Parks Road."

"Possible? Is anything impossible?"

– The Duke of Wellington

Organic Chemistry, Inorganic Chemistry: the massive science buildings along the northern side of South Parks Road were like a line of understated Art Deco cruise liners moored up against the broad grassland of the University Parks.

Soon Webb and Harris were deep within the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, meeting the vivacious red-headed pathologist Sandra Lomax in protective long apron and the vet from the Cotswold Wildlife Park, similarly attired.

The vet's name was Lucy Fisher – she was blonde and muscular. On the dissecting table Five-Half lay slit open.

"Let me guess," said Webb. "You've found no internal organs – certainly not as we understand them."

"How did you know?" exclaimed Sandra Lomax.

As Webb approached the table, he admitted, "I don't much care for corpses, but this isn't one. Quite simply it isn't a dead body."

He couldn't recognize any of the component parts exposed within the slim torso. Although they had a somewhat organic look to them they were nothing like human organs or the organs of any other animal, nor did any bodily fluids cause them to glisten.

"Will you stitch it up again?" said Webb. "Use sticky tape if you like. Then if someone can give Harris a hand I'm taking Five-Half back to Balliol."

It was Lucy Fisher who helped Harris manoeuvre the defunct D-Entity into the front seat of the two-door Stag to the accompaniment of hostile barks.

"Shall Ah drive, sir?" Harris volunteered after seat-belted the body. "Skipper's none too happy about *that* particular passenger."

At that moment, *William Tell* commenced stridently.

"I appreciate the pressures upon you, sir," Webb was

saying presently to Turtle, "but in view of what I now know I'm going to release the body." He made noises like static. "Bad reception here. I think we've breaking up." He switched off the mobile. "Yes, Harris, you drive."

Harris held the big door wide so that Webb could clamber into the rear seat, awkwardly.

Normally Webb tried to avoid contact with the gentlemen and madams of the media, but thanks to Skipper he could foresee headlines which might bring ridicule upon him, and besides he felt sorely tempted to demonstrate that not all human knowledge (nor the ability to *think*) was the province of Balliol College, which the alien advent there, rather than elsewhere, might imply. Furthermore he was fairly sure of the only feasible way to separate himself from his dog without injury to either party.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 ensured that a wheelchair was at hand in the Porter's Lodge. Or Porters' Lodge. Harris wheeled that chair out into Broad Street, and into it the Sergeant and a Constable wrestled the taped-together Five-Half to the accompaniment of frantic questions from the crowd and much picturing and filming, during which Webb remained mute, although not Skipper. Then Webb smiled, and beckoned to all and sundry to follow him.

Never mind the COLLEGE CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC board, standing inside the gateway, which soon toppled over. Preceded by Harris pushing the wheelchair flanked by Webb, a horde poured diagonally across the small front quadrangle, home to the college chapel, then through the passage under the college library, and into the verdant paradise of trees and grass beyond – surrounded, from south to north and back again, by the Master's lodgings, then by many staircases (or rather, the habitations to which these gave entry), then by the Hall, then the Senior Common Room, then the long herbaceous boundary with much-loathed Trinity College, and finally the Fellows' Garden.

As Webb advanced, the many people already in the vicinity of the SCR who were marvelling at the appearance (and occasional disappearance) of the D-Entities, or trying to understand them, turned in his direction.

"And there's the Master," observed Webb. "Master, good day!"

"What are you *doing*?" demanded Sir Anthony Wiseman, aghast at beholding the body in the wheelchair.

"I'm going to explain what happened," Webb announced, and a hush fell over the two convergent crowds.

Two D-Entities reappeared near Webb, and he regarded them coolly, unlike Skipper who barked madly for a while.

Webb raised his voice. "I was intrigued by their *names*... One-Half, Two-Half... and here in this chair, Five-Half. They give themselves numbers, yet they call themselves *half*. This suggest that they aren't whole, that part of each of them is missing, absent, elsewhere – we can't see it. Also, the part that is present quite often floats a bit above the ground.

"One of them spoke of the apparent murder victim being severed and disconnected. Disconnected from *what*, I wondered. I say 'apparent victim' because no death actually

took place.”

“Looks dead enough to me!” someone shouted.

“With a certain amount of cogitation I was able to predict the result of the post-mortem. Which is that this body,” and Webb patted the thin shoulder of Five-Half, “has no internal organs. It only has components. In effect, it is an ingeniously constructed puppet – which was operated by whatever a D-Entity,” and he nodded to Hugh Dermot Kemp, “actually *is* when it’s at home.

“I make no guesses about what the inhabitants of that other region really look like, *but these are not they*. These are something made approximately in our own human image, so that we should not be alarmed – and perhaps because the actual D-Entities cannot survive in our world. What happened in the Senior Common Room was a loss of control over one of the puppets. The link to its operator was severed, perhaps purely by accident. Maybe the operators got in each other’s way.”

Webb gazed around.

“You wouldn’t wish a piece of advanced technology to fall into the hands of a comparatively primitive people who still regularly murder one another. Hence,” and Webb flourished his arm and Skipper, “the negative reaction towards me due to the removal of this puppet in pursuance of proper procedure. Removal must have made the puppet difficult or impossible to retrieve. For some reason, no doubt to do with dimensions,” and he raised an eyebrow at Kemp, “they could interfere with me at my home but they couldn’t connect with the puppet in the morgue. Now that the body is back here in Balliol again, I sincerely hope that its controller is able to link up and remove it, if that is now possible.”

“No!” cried out Kemp. “Advanced technology! We can learn so much.”

Webb retorted, “I have no wish to carry a dog’s head on my arm for the rest of my days.” He eyed the nearest of the bobbing puppets. “Will whatever is behind this thing in the chair kindly take it away?”

For a few moments nothing happened, except for some outcry from several Fellows and a few other people who seemed to regard themselves as special. Then light coruscated around Five-Half – and the puppet jerked upright. Briefly it danced, then it vanished.

“‘Tis sweet to hear the watch-dog’s honest bark...”

– Lord Byron

Gathering around Webb, the other puppets seemed to pluck at thin air.

He felt such a strange sensation – as Skipper began to emerge. It was as if Webb’s arm was giving birth to the dog. Its front legs came free. As the torso followed, the extra weight dragged Webb’s arm down. When the hind legs and tail came loose, an intact Skipper fell no more than a couple of feet on to the lawn. Promptly the Schnautzer fled howling into the crowd, away from the vicinity of the three bobbing puppets.

One by one, the puppets popped out of existence.

Webb examined his bare arm. Where Skipper’s head

had protruded, only a circular red line remained.

“Oh god, not ringworm!”

“You blundering fool!” expostulated the Tutor in Physics.

“The D-Entities have all gone away!”

“And now the good citizens of Oxford shan’t be spooked, Mr Kemp.”

Pushing through the crowd, came Chief Superintendent Turtle accompanied by, oh, it was the Chief Constable of Oxfordshire, James Hoskins perspiring in full uniform.

Webb sat with Harris in an air-conditioned Italian restaurant in North Parade, Summertown, which served a very decent Mocha. The boost from the chocolate component seemed a vital addition to the caffeine boost. Harris nursed a glass of tap water which should cost nothing. They had left Skipper in the Stag, windows open a few inches to avert canine heat-stroke.

Indignantly, Webb repeated the comment which the Chief Constable had made to him on Balliol’s lawn.

“A *shambles*? Would you call this case a shambles, Harris?”

“Well, sir, you *might* say that there wasn’t ever any case to start with.”

“Anyone who does crosswords would know that the proper meaning of shambles is a slaughterhouse.”

“Ah think the Chief Constable meant a mess.”

“A *confusion*? What was confused about my conclusions?”

“Ah think the eggheads are angry about the D-Entities breaking off contact.”

“Huh! Who knows what the real D-Entities are like? They may be the size of whales, with lots of tentacles.”

“That’s giant squids, sir.”

“I probably did the world a service. Mrs Endlicott thought the puppet was a monster. What monsters are there in *man*, eh, Harris? We already have enough monsters.” Webb consulted his watch. “I suppose we’d better eat here. Be a lot better than the food at the canteen in Kidlington.”

“But sir – ”

“Would you rather we stop at a greasy spoon?”

Harris stared at the menu. *Calamari*, *Ossobuco*, *Funghi*, *Polenta*. “Why yes, to tell the truth... The thing is, I don’t have enough *cash* left.”

“I saw a machine on the corner, Harris. You should always draw out enough. Never fear, I’ll buy our next meal. Even though I did win my wager.”

Ian Watson’s short-story collection *The Great Escape* (published by Golden Gryphon in the USA) was chosen by *The Washington Post* as one of the eight best sf and fantasy titles of 2002. His latest novel, *Mockymen*, is out this month (October 2003) from the same publisher – and the first part of it consists of a novella originally published in *Interzone*, “Secrets” (issue 124). Also, earlier this year, Ian won a Rhysling Award for sf poetry.

More Fools Than Wise

Cherith Baldry

*More geese than swans now live,
More fools than wise.*

– Orlando Gibbons, *The Silver Swan*

The sun was high and the sky clanged like a brass bowl as I walked the old road to Swanshill. Creeping vetch and trefoil had split the surface into ragged chunks. Feathery spires of willowherb crowded on either side, among briars that threw out tentacles across the path. In the fields beyond, the grass was burnt brown, half strangled by thistles and rusty spikes of sorrel.

The Ministry had issued me with a permit for a land-craft, but after the interchange the broken surface was too rough for it. I had been forced to abandon it by the side of the road, glittering incongruously in this parched landscape.

Sweat prickled in my hair and across my shoulderblades. Dust coated my shoes; the air smelt of it. Awkwardly I shifted my bag from one hand to the other as I reached the top of the rise and looked across the valley to Swanshill.

Trees still crowded around the house, the mellow, rose-coloured brickwork showing in patches between them. I could make out a sharp gable and the uneven line of the roof silhouetted against the sky. The garden wall – tumbledown even when I lived there – had been reduced to heaps of rubble, and where the wrought iron gates had once stood was a wire mesh barrier and the squat box of an observation post. The garden beyond it bristled with weeds, and the lake had become a marshy hollow, choked with sedge. The hot wind bore its fetid smell to where I stood on the ridge. With the taste of corruption on my tongue I walked down the hill towards the gateway.

I had not visited the house for ten years, and I had never expected to visit it again, until the day before,

when the orders had come from the Ministry. Swanshill was the last place I wanted to go, but I was not senior enough, yet, to question those orders.

Now the memories I had repressed for so long were rising to strangle me as surely as the weeds strangled the garden. It was all I could do to thrust them away yet again, to walk on, and to pretend it did not matter that in a few minutes I would stand once more in the entrance hall, in Meridian, in the heart of the world.

I showed my pass to the guard at the observation post, skirted the lake, and climbed the steep slope past the overgrown terraces of the garden.

They had been watching. As I approached the house, another guard emerged and said abruptly, “This way.”

He took me not to the house, but to the suite of rooms above the old stables where the groom had lived – old Jacob who slicked the coats of my father’s hunters to gleaming perfection, and taught me to ride my first pony. He was long gone now; a black Ministry car with tinted windows was parked where the horses had once been stalled.

At the top of the steps the guard opened the door to the left and showed me in without any announcement. Seated at a desk was a thin, middle-aged woman in colonel’s uniform. Her hair, in a crisp military cut, was the same rust colour as the sorrel in the fields. She tapped a stylus on the flatscreen which lay on the tooled leather surface of her desk, blanking out the file she had been studying. Then she faced me, looking at me with a sour curve of the lips that might have been a smile.

“Mark... you don’t mind if I call you that? I am Colonel Barrett. You know why you’re here?”

I straightened. “No, ma’am.”

“No...” She sighed faintly. “And they call it the Ministry of Information. Never mind. Of course you’ve heard

of Charles Hollis?"

"Yes, of course."

Why did she need to ask? Everyone had heard of Charles Hollis. Besides, my record must have told her that Charles had tutored me at music college, when he was just embarking on the career that would bring him international acclaim. I was curious to discover why she should mention his name now.

"Mark, I believe you were born here at Swanshill?" Colonel Barrett asked.

The abrupt change of subject gave me an unpleasant jolt, which ebbed to leave apprehension behind it. My father had been too vocal at the time when the Party seized power under cover of a national emergency. That was how we lost Swanshill. It wasn't politic for me to remember those days, and I hoped no one else would remember, either, though of course the details would be on my record.

"Yes," I said cautiously.

"You are aware that the house is now a Ministry facility?"

I nodded. After we left, the house had been requisitioned on behalf of some Party activist who had expressed a wish for the life of a country gentleman. Six months of it had sent him screaming back to the metropolis, and then the Ministry had moved in. I had never tried to find out what they used it for.

"Hollis is now a... guest here."

The Colonel was watching me as she said this. The first question that sprang to my mind was "What have you done to him?" but of course I was not stupid enough to ask it. I just kept quiet until she was ready to go on.

"Three months ago he returned from an international tour." I had waited her out, and she did not look displeased. "Naturally, he was not unescorted. Our informant reports that a contact was made, and a piece of information passed over. Information that would be extremely valuable to the Resistance."

Now I felt genuinely shocked. Charles a member of the Resistance! When I knew him, he always mocked at politics. "I can do more with one song," I remembered him saying, with that sublime self-confidence that was only a breath away from arrogance, "to increase the sum of human happiness, than any regime on the face of the earth."

And the Resistance – that was what they called themselves, invoking the heroism of the past, but everyone knew they were terrorists. Practically every day the newlines broadcast details of some new atrocity. They talked about freedom, but what they really wanted was power. I could not imagine how Charles had come to be mixed up with them.

"When he came back to this country we met him at the airport and brought him straight here," the Colonel continued. "He had no opportunity to pass on his information, and yet we found nothing in his luggage or on his person. He has persistently refused to tell us anything – not the nature of the information, or what he did with it, or the names of his contacts." She leant forward, her gaze intensifying. "Mark, it is essential that we have that information. You are going to get it for us."

I stared at her. My apprehension deepened. "But I –

I'm not trained in interrogation techniques. I haven't –

"Of course not." The Colonel sat back again, with a dismissive gesture. "You are seconded to his staff. Secretary, attendant... dogsbody, if you like. I know that for a while you shared his musical background... He will trust you – perhaps."

I shook my head. "I don't think so." I couldn't stop myself protesting, even while I knew how stupid I was being. "I'm the wrong person for this job. I don't know why you would choose me."

"Oh, we didn't choose you." Colonel Barrett gave me her sour, curved smile. "Charles Hollis chose you."

When the guard showed me to my room and left me alone, I was almost terrified enough to flee from the house. As if I would ever make it past the observation post. And where would I go, if I did?

I could not imagine why Charles had asked for me. But there was only one reason why the Ministry would agree. They didn't trust me either. Now we were under one roof, they could watch both of us. And the only way I could recover their trust would be to get the information they wanted.

I sat on the bed with my head in my hands, and shivered.

When I lived at Swanshill as a child, what I loved best about the house was that all the rooms had names, painted on the lintel above the door. Meridian, the hallway, the centre of the house. Seraphim, which my father used as a study. The nursery where I slept was Seventh Heaven. Now they had put me in Hundred Wheels. Once I had imagined a train, but now I felt trapped in some intricate mechanism, grinding me to powder, the wheels where men are broken.

I stood up as I heard footsteps outside the door: the guard again, escorting me to meet Charles. As I followed him downstairs, I noticed for the first time the scars on the floorboards, once polished to a silken glow, and the marks on the plastered walls, as if furniture had been scraped against them. The antique rugs and most of the pictures were gone, and the cabinet that had always stood in Meridian was empty of my mother's collection of ivory and jade.

The guard led me to the room called Occidens. Charles was sitting there, in the afternoon sunlight that poured through the window. He was relaxed in a chair, dressed in loose cotton shirt and trousers, sitting half turned to the light. At first, in the glare and confusion, I thought nothing was wrong.

Then as he spun towards us I saw he was sitting in a wheelchair. He was skeleton thin, and his skin when he propelled himself out of the reddening light was grey-pale. His hair was dishevelled, the colour and texture of straw.

"Charles," I said. I went over to him and held out a hand, but he did not respond. Feebly I added, "It's been a long time."

Charles raised his hand, but not to take mine. He held a thing that looked like a microphone to his throat, and a voice spoke, without timbre, without expression.

"Mark. So good of you to come." His eyes gleamed with the mockery the voice could not express. "Welcome to

Swanshill. Or should I say, welcome back?"

I don't know what I did then, or what I said. The next thing I remember is sitting opposite him, with a glass of brandy on the table at my side. The guard had gone.

The mechanical voice was speaking. "This –" he gestured with the microphone "– was an accident, I believe. An... excess of enthusiasm. They wouldn't deliberately leave me unable to communicate."

"But your voice..." Somehow, I managed to choke words out. "The music..."

"Ah, yes, the music." He nodded towards a player set against the far wall. "Put something on, would you? So far they haven't interfered with my hearing."

My hands were shaking so much that I could hardly fumble a disc into the slot and press the right buttons. A glorious countertenor voice soared into the room, and I realized it was one of Charles's own recordings.

Horried, I was turning back to switch it off again, when the synthetic tones cut across the living voice from the machine. "No, no. Leave it. Come here."

I sat down again, got the glass to my mouth and swallowed brandy. Someone – had I done it myself? – had poured a glass for Charles; he sipped, listening judiciously. "A little too much *vibrato*," he commented in that voice that was capable of no *vibrato* at all.

"Why didn't you tell them?" I asked.

"Tell them? Oh, the famous information. Mark, I could not tell them. There is no information."

I stared at him. "What?"

"No information. No contact. Nothing to tell."

"Then you're not a member of the Resistance?" I couldn't keep the relief out of my voice. I had never wanted to believe that of him.

Charles smiled. "Mark, there is no Resistance."

I wanted to laugh. What they had done to him had turned his wits. "That's nonsense!"

"Oh, no. The Party needs the Resistance. They need an enemy. A bogey to frighten you with."

"You mean they *invented* it?"

The amusement in Charles's eyes would have warmed his voice, but nothing could warm the sounds from the microphone. "Not consciously. They believe in it. They believe desperately. With everything they have done... the atrocities they have committed... could they sleep at night if they did not believe in something worse?"

I tossed off the last of the brandy, almost choking as it scorched its way down my throat. Without wanting to, I was beginning to understand. The newlines were full of Resistance acts of terrorism, but I'd never met anyone who had experienced them first hand. Occasionally there were reports of executions, but never any public trials.

"There is no Resistance," Charles repeated, and I believed him.

Almost I hated him. If there was no information, there was nothing I could give to the Ministry, nothing to stand between me and the torture Charles had already suffered.

"What am I going to do?" I asked myself, and realized I had spoken the words aloud.

I did not expect a reply, and I did not want Charles to think I was asking for pity. He paused for a moment, let-

ting the question hang in the air, and then propelled the wheelchair closer to me.

"We're bugged, of course. And this" – he tapped the microphone – "is all recorded."

I started up, panic building. In the shock of seeing him, the caution I had learnt to live with had been swept away; somehow I had never thought we might be overheard.

Charles waved me back into my seat. "Ignore it. They think I'm raving mad. They'll discount all this." As I went on looking at him, unable to believe him, he added, "Now. Tell me about Oriens."

I opened my mouth to reply and said nothing; I felt as if the room was empty of air. At first I thought that no one knew of the room named Oriens but me, and my mother, who had killed herself when they took my father away.

Then I remembered when I first heard of my father's arrest and my mother's death, and knew I could never go home again to Swanshill. I had been at music college then. My reaction had been to get drunk, and spend the night rambling on to anyone who would listen about my parents, and the house, and the life that was over.

Had Charles been there? I couldn't remember, but he must have been, because I had told the story that night, with so many others.

I was five years old. I stood on the threshold of Oriens and pushed open the door. A dazzling light poured out, and a voice with the sound of silver trumpets. I ran to my mother and told her I had seen an angel. She had smiled, and afterwards I came to believe that I must have been dreaming, because there was not, and never could have been, a room named Oriens.

Charles pressed the microphone to his throat and the flat, mechanical voice came from it. "I shall sing in Oriens. You must take me there."

"I can't. It doesn't exist."

He leant forward, a tense urgency in every line of him. "It existed once. When you were a child you could get there. You must know the way."

"Look." I stood up. "I'll take you and prove it to you if you like. The land slopes down to the lake. There's nowhere to build another room."

"And what you saw?"

"It was a dream."

He leant back in the chair. To my surprise, the mobile mouth was smiling. "Then you will have to learn to dream it again," he said.

For the next few days I carried out the Colonel's orders, and made myself into Charles's attendant. I helped him to get up and go to bed, escorted him to the bathroom, fetched and carried for him. The helpless embarrassment I had felt at first faded as it all became routine.

Charles never spoke of Oriens again, but on the fourth day I found him staring at the blank wall that closed off one of the downstairs passages. Ice crackled its way up my spine. This was the place where I thought I had seen the open door of Oriens, but I could not recall that I had ever told anyone exactly where it was.

As I hesitated, wondering what to say, Charles touched a control on his wheelchair. The chair shot forward,

slammed into the wall, and rebounded. An antique map of the county which was hanging there fell from its nail; the glass shattered as it hit the floor. Charles was hunched over, gripping the arms of the chair, his body heaving in sobs that were all the more terrifying for being silent.

I had never seen him lose control before. After the first, appalled moment I went to him and made him sit up. Blood trickled from his cheek where a shard of flying glass had struck him.

"It isn't there," I said.

He glared at me with something like hatred. His hands were shaking but the voice from the microphone, as he stabbed it at his throat, could not be anything but even. "It will be. One day it will be. With you or without you."

He spun the chair, forcing me to step back, and glided off. I was left to clear up the broken glass.

Every night, once Charles was in bed, the Colonel called me to her rooms in the stable block to report.

"Oriens," she said, tapping a stylus on the shining surface of her desk. It was the evening of the day when Charles had tried to break his way through the wall. "Is he mad?"

I was asking myself that. I did not think that anyone could suffer and lose so much and stay sane. Which meant that I could not believe anything he told me. There could be information; there could be a Resistance.

"I don't know," I said; we were both taking the bugs for granted by now. "I thought I saw something, when I was a child. That much is true."

Colonel Barrett shrugged. "Children imagine things."

"Then he's mad," I said. "Even if he has information, he can't pass it on. Maybe he doesn't even remember what it is, or what he did with it. He believes what he tells me, I'm sure of that."

"Are you?" Her eyes were bleak. "I'm not. And don't try to wriggle out of this assignment, Mark. We're all here until he breaks." She smiled. "Or, of course, until he finds his way to Oriens."

After the incident in the passage, Charles treated me with a sharp antagonism that faded as the days went by, though he answered no questions and volunteered no information. In our evening sessions, the Colonel was growing impatient.

The day came when her patience ran out. She came for Charles, with a couple of guards, and they withdrew to the small room called Nadir. I was dismissed; I hovered outside the door for a few moments, but I could hear nothing. Somehow, that was worse than the sound of screaming; I knew there could be no screams.

I felt as though the house was clenching itself around that knot of horror in its midst. I had to get out. I sat in the garden, gazing out over the dry fields and the observation post, while the brassy sun climbed the sky.

The lines of the house looked harsh, as if it was a paper cut-out pasted onto a dead landscape. It didn't belong there. What was happening violated Swanshill just as it violated Charles. And there was nothing I could

do for either of them.

The sun was high when one of the guards called me indoors. Charles was slumped in his wheelchair, head drooping. Every few seconds a fit of trembling shook him.

The Colonel stalked off without a word; she did not need to tell me that the session had failed. I pushed the chair into Occidens and over to the bed.

As I bent over Charles he roused slightly and reached out to touch my arm; it was the only time he had touched me willingly. Then his hand fumbled the microphone into place, and it spoke his words. "Mark, learn to dream."

When I had settled him in bed I went back to my own room, back to Hundred Wheels, where I lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "Learn to dream." I had known how, once. I had dreamed of making music, but that dream had been shattered when I lost Swanshill, and elected instead the apparent safety of a career within the Party.

I remembered Charles, the day I left college, crashing his way into my room and demanding what I thought I was doing. He spoke of my gift for music, in terms that would have flattered me only days before. He called me coward, and traitor.

"That story you told, about Oriens," he said at last, when he had given up trying to make me change my mind. "Do you know what it means?"

I shook my head.

"I think I do." He spoke reflectively, half smiling. "Oriens is the source of music." His voice deepened to disgust, and he slammed out again, leaving me with his last unanswered question. "Do you think you will ever get back there now?"

Now everything before that seemed like a dream, fading in the harsh light of day. I did not know how to get back there. I did not know the way to Oriens.

After a while, I slept, but no dreams came, only tangled nightmares in which I stumbled through the passages of Swanshill, looking for a door that was always just around the next corner, and knowing that even if I found it, it would be closed to me.

Much later – the sky was red now as the sun went down – I sat upright. I felt my heart beat fast. I thought a voice had awakened me, but I could hear nothing now, and when I asked, "Who's there?" there was no answer.

Something about my room terrified me, as if the wheels were grinding, just below the threshold of hearing. I dragged the door open and stumbled into the passage, supporting myself with one hand against the wall. The plaster felt clammy, as if the house was sweating.

It loathed this, I knew. Once it had been gracious, comfortable, a place for laughter, music, good conversation. Now it had become a torture chamber, a prison where the only bars were on the spirit.

I could almost feel the walls and joists flexing, as a huge animal might rise and stretch, fur rippling over muscles long unused. Each separate room was waking to its true nature. Dragon and Seraphim open and calling to their intelligences. Nadir a dark spiral sucking downwards, Zenith a scoured emptiness... Occidens where everything would go down into the night. And Oriens, which had

never existed, never could exist in this world.

The stairs were heaving like a switchback. I half fell down them, calling Charles's name. From somewhere at the bottom of the passage, I could hear his voice, lifted in song. At first I thought it was the disc we had played on that first day, but the tone was brighter, more vibrant, the whole rendition suffused with an incalculable joy.

Mesmerized by that voice, I walked down the passage. Where, the day before, had been the plastered wall and the antique map restored and hanging on it, there was a door. I looked up, knowing what I would see painted on the lintel. The name: Oriens.

I pushed open the door. A dazzling light poured out, and a voice with the sound of silver trumpets. The brilliance stung my eyes; I blinked to clear my vision, and saw a small, panelled room with an open window opposite. Charles stood there, his back to me, singing to the sunrise.

I felt unsteady on my feet, as if the whole house was lifting on the tide, tugging at the ground like a ship on its mooring rope. I grabbed the doorpost to steady myself. I could see nothing outside the window, nothing but the light.

Charles brought his song to an end with a triumphant flourish of notes. As the last one died away I could hear other voices, more beautiful still, music to tear the heart. They sounded immeasurably distant, yet powerful, hauling at the house like grappling irons, singing it home.

I stood there, gripped by terror, as Charles turned round to face me. His eyes were wide and brilliant.

The wreck of a man, dependent on his chair, his attendant, the microphone, had vanished. Every movement was controlled.

He held out a hand to me and said, "Come."

I couldn't move. After a moment he repeated, more urgently, "Come. It's time."

"Where?" I said, stupidly.

"You know where. Swanshill can't live here. It can't breathe. There's nowhere in this world left for it to be."

The floor canted. Now the house was not so much a ship ready to breast the tide as a bird poised for flight. It was time.

I looked at Charles's outstretched hand. I wanted to step forward and take it, but I was afraid. I had to go back and report; after this the Ministry would know I had never betrayed them. There – wherever *there* was – I would be ripped open. All the fears, all the compromises, all the grubby deals in mean little rooms, everything laid open to the last detail. I would shrivel and be gone.

"Mark!" Charles cried in a voice like a clap of thunder.

I wanted to take his hand but I still hesitated. And in that second's hesitation the floor heaved up between us. I lost my grip on the doorpost and fell, rolling back along the passage as it rippled under me.

Clawing for a purchase I saw the floorboards rise up over my head like a tidal wave. I was flung backwards; the door to the garden burst open as I hit it, and Swanshill spat me out across the terrace and down into the weed-choked garden.

As I struggled to my knees I saw the dawn light of Oriens pour through the house and out of every window, yet where

I knelt was still in shadow. For an eternal moment I saw Swanshill wrapped in golden fire, and then it was gone.

I heard a clap like a monstrous wingbeat, as air rushed in to fill the vacuum. Wind spun me round, half lifted me, and dashed me to the ground. I dug my fingers into raw soil; I could taste it and smell it.

The tornado raged round me and abruptly stilled.

After a moment I dared to sit up and look around.

The house had left a gash across the hilltop, like land churned by war. Soil and grit still hung in the air, stinging my eyes. The stable block survived, though tiles had been ripped from the roof. Colonel Barrett stood at the top of the steps, staring.

I blinked dust from my eyes and looked further. At the bottom of the hill guards were tumbling out of the gatehouse, running, yelling. One of them fired his heatgun and a dead tree at the edge of the lake burst into flame.

Beyond the fetid bowl of the lake, as far as the horizon, was nothing but grass bent under the hot, withering wind. Not even a ploughman, furrowing towards the sky. Not even one.

Cherith Baldry's most recent fantasy novel, *The Reliquary Ring*, was published by Macmillan in February 2003. Her one previous story for *Interzone* was "Under the Saffron Tree" (issue 166). She lives in Reigate, Surrey.

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CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

Stan Nicholls

*interviewed by
Sandy Auden*

The face of fantasy fiction has undergone major surgery in the last few years, and being a successful fantasy writer is becoming more and more demanding. As well as having to be a skilful wordsmith, you need to be a construction worker, a political spin doctor, a qualified wizard and a psychiatrist – at least.

Stan Nicholls's new novel, Quicksilver Rising, illustrates how all these skills can come together to create a brand-new, magic-enhanced world. In Bhealfa, political machinations can be fatal, understanding your enemy's motive is essential and picking your friends is a matter for careful consideration. There's a large cast of highly individual characters and an interwoven magic system that makes more sense than certain real-life monetary systems. A more sophisticated novel for a more discerning readership perhaps?

I caught up with Nicholls to discover his opinions about current developments in the fantasy genre...

Fantasy seems to be very popular at the moment. What do you attribute this to, and what implications, if any, does it have for science fiction?

I've never recognized a great distinction between fantasy, science fiction and even supernatural fiction. For me, they've always been equally valid expressions of imaginative speculation; all points on the same scale. I've found, as both a reader and a writer, that sf and fantasy hold similar attractions. The reason I've come to concentrate on writing fantasy is simply because I seem to have more emotional and creative empathy with the genre. I don't see it as better or worse than science fiction, just different in degree. Sf was my first love and I continue to devour it in quantity and occasionally write it. But fantasy comes easier for me. Maybe I'm not smart enough to understand and manipulate the scientific aspects of sf. It's not that I'm a luddite – far from it – it's just that I have a kind of impatience with conventional logic when it comes to my own fiction. I know that's the sort of statement that rings alarm bells with sf purists, who deride what they perceive as fantasy's lack of scientific rigour, and it probably confirms their suspicions about how sloppy we all are over here in this particular ghetto. I can understand that

attitude but I don't really agree with it, unless you're saying that immortality, time travel and faster-than-light drives are more valid propositions than magic or mythical beasts. I suppose I'm saying that I've come down on the side of the argument that regards science fiction as a branch of fantasy.

Part of fantasy's current boom, obviously, is down to the popularity of Harry Potter, Philip Pullman, Terry Pratchett – though I've always thought of him as a humorous writer who works with fantasy themes rather than as a fantasy writer *per se* – and Peter Jackson's excellent film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*. Whether Potter and the *Rings* movies have a permanent impact on the popularity of fantasy fiction remains to be seen. I think a more fundamental reason for the spreading interest in fantasy is that the form is coming of age, similar to the way sf started to mature with the 1960s New Wave. In fact, people are beginning to apply the label "New Fantasy" to some of the fiction being published now. I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, but it's certainly true that the genre has grown up enough to tackle subject matter that wouldn't have featured in it just a few years ago. Does this have implications for science fiction? Only insofar as the

two forms have been joined at the hip for years and anything that affects one is presumed to have some kind of bearing on the other. Sf is doing pretty well too at the moment – perhaps not in terms of sales overall, but certainly in respect of the achievements of a new generation of writers, many of them British.

If the subject matter is broader now, do you think fantasy stories are gaining more relevance to real life, rather than being pure escapism?

I think they're still both. Fantasy has always been a broad church – think of Robert E. Howard and China Miéville, Robin Hobb and Jonathan Carroll, Tolkien and J.V. Jones, to grab a few names out of the air – but I believe that breadth is now being matched by depth. In terms of the themes modern fantasy feels confident to handle, and the general level of writing expertise, things are definitely on the up. It's long been said that much science fiction, no matter how far-flung a future it's set in or how bizarre its concepts, is actually about the here and now, and that's a self-evident truth. It seems to me fantasy's starting to do the same, and that many of its preoccupations mirror contemporary issues. It's something I'm trying to do myself.

My publisher, Jane Johnson – someone I respect for her editorial and writing skills alike – came out with a statement a few months ago that caused a bit of a stir in science-fiction circles. The Voyager imprint, of which Jane is the Editorial Director, commissioned market research to identify the fantasy-reading public, and to discover what attitudes general readers have towards the genre. I don't think anyone has ever done that before, and it yielded some interesting facts. Some of it confirmed what a lot of us already suspected – that even fantasy devotees are growing weary of standard, generic covers, for example. One major finding, again no great surprise to many of us, was that there are people out there who've never sampled fantasy but would be prepared to give it a try if it was presented in a more accessible way. This led Jane to tell the trade press that maybe fantasy should be separated from science fiction in bookstores. There were two reasons for that opinion. One is simply that fantasy isn't sf. The other is that people's preconceptions about one genre are rubbing off onto the other. This seems to have hit a raw nerve with some people in the sf community, but I think that in commercial terms she was absolutely right. It seems perfectly logical to me that someone who wouldn't be interested in a novel featuring, say, space exploration, might on the other hand go for a fantasy set in a

medieval-type world that contained an element of magic. As I read it, Jane wasn't saying that science fiction was pulling down fantasy, and implying that sf was therefore somehow inferior: she was making the entirely sensible marketing point that a reader who might like Tolkien wouldn't necessarily get on with Stephen Baxter, as excellent an author as he is. When you think about it, there's no rational reason why the two should be racked together. In fact, you could argue that it's to the potential detriment of both. Okay, the water's muddled somewhat by crossover titles that have a foot in each, but I think the general principle holds.

What Jane didn't say – this is solely my opinion – is that there's another reason why we should consider separating fantasy from sf, and it might sound contentious. Because science fiction and fantasy have historically been wedded, and sf is the older discrete form, most of the forums for assessment and criticism of fantasy are first and foremost sf-oriented. Most of the people who review fantasy are coming at it from a science-fiction perspective. And, I have to say this: a lot of sf enthusiasts just don't like fantasy. Whatever the reason for this – maybe it's the perception of it lacking scientific plausibility – these critics tend to approach the field with hostility, or at least scepticism. It seems to me that expecting a science-fiction person to objectively evaluate fantasy is like asking a member of an Old West appreciation society to review crime novels. The two forms have grown apart. Now, I abhor the idea that there should be this kind of animosity between these genres – and it can be two-way because there are fantasy readers with just as much prejudice about sf. I see all fantastical fiction as part of a spectrum, so this sort of animosity feels pointless to me anyway. In fact, I veer towards the notion that there shouldn't be categories at all, and that fiction should be judged on its merits rather than the pigeonhole it's forced into. But here in the real world, it ain't like that. Actually, I find the whole thing rather depressing. It's like, I remember when I was a teenager and meeting socially a black man who ten minutes into the conversation revealed himself as an extreme anti-Semite. He was really vehement in his hatred of Jews, and in my youthful naivety I was saying, "How can you be like that after all your people have been through?" It sounds like an over-the-top comparison, but that's sort of how I feel about sf people being disdainful of fantasy. Or the *Doctor Who* fans hating the *Star Trek* fans, or people who read books showing contempt for film enthusiasts. We're all

miserable outcasts, for God's sake; the least we can do is stick together.

When you see the unchanging attitude of the literati, there's good reason for us to be mutually supportive. Their ridiculously élitist prejudices, traditionally so hostile to sf, are just as sneering about fantasy. I loathe the mind-set that says anything labelled science fiction or fantasy should be ignored or at best ridiculed, but a novel with a mainstream writer's name on it, no matter how much it derives from our genres, can be lauded. The most recent example of this, of course, was the desperate verbal gymnastics Margaret Atwood went through to distance herself from any hint that her novels might be sf, when they so obviously are. When Philip K. Dick wrote a novel about time running backwards, published as sf, he received no "serious" critical attention at all. When, decades later, Martin Amis published something strikingly similar he was praised for the originality of his idea. The list of so-called literary fictions "inspired" by concepts familiar to sf readers grows ever longer, and there's no need to go into all that here. But it does seem a shame that we pour buckets of shit over each other when we're already covered in the stuff courtesy of the literary establishment. I'd better shut up about this or you'll have to burn a feather under my nose.

We live in the technological wonderland of the 21st Century, so why do you think magic is such a popular mythology?

Maybe it's increasingly popular because we live in such a technologically-driven age. Technology brings lots of benefits, but a downside is that it can leave people feeling a bit overwhelmed and even alienated. That could be one of the reasons why the notion of magic catches the imaginations of so many people. It might be a contributing factor to the current popularity of fantasy fiction in general. The idea of magic is quite seductive, and of course its appeal isn't new; it's been an abiding fantasy for a very long time. It's especially attractive to children. That's partly because younger minds tend to be more open to accepting fantastical propositions. But there's also the empowerment aspect. What bullied kid wouldn't love to be able to turn their tormentor into a slug, or set a fire-breathing dragon on a rotten teacher? Another fascination is that magic is usually presented as exclusive – its practitioners are a fraternity, a brotherhood – and that kind of elitism is a powerful day-dream. There are times when most of us feel like outcasts, whatever our age, and the possibility that we might

have or could acquire magical powers can be kind of cheering. Undoubtedly a good deal of J.K. Rowling's success can be put down to the fact that she understands this. If you accept the proposition that many adults are just kids in disguise – and that certainly applies to a lot of writers – you can see why magic has such a hold.

You significantly change your magic system with each set of novels. How easy do you find it to re-invent the magical wheel every time? Do they get easier to invent or harder, the more you do it?

I have ideas for three or four magical systems I haven't used yet – fairly complete ideas – and several more at a notional stage. These are ideas that have occurred to me over a period of time, in some cases, years ago, and weren't tied to any specific story. The magical system in my new novel, *Quicksilver Rising*, wasn't taken from any of those existing ideas – none of them really fitted. The one I used occurred to me when I was working-up the plot. There was always going to be magic in the "Quicksilver" trilogy, I just wasn't sure what form it would take or how integral it was going to be. That was a worry, because I'm a firm believer in all plot elements having a relevant function, and I didn't want magic just for the sake of it, or because it was expected of a fantasy. Essentially, what I came up with was a world where magic was all-pervasive both in the sense of its abundance and as a social signifier. Magic as commodity, currency, technology, and, most importantly, as the prop for a class system. A culture where you quite literally get the magic you can afford; where your social status is reflected in the quality of the sorcery you pay for. So I kind of turned that elite idea of magic on its head, because in this world everybody has access to it. Only, human nature being what it is, there are still elites, based on material worth. I already had the main thrust of the story, which concerns a world dominated by two equally matched empires and the efforts of a diverse resistance movement to oppose their tyranny – I suppose you could call it a utopian fantasy – and I knew all the characters that were going to populate the story, and the relationships between them. But layering-in that particular form of magic crystallized everything, and nicely illustrated the value system of the world. Obviously, it also acts as a kind of political analogy. None of this necessarily leaps into your head fully-formed, so yes, you have to work at it.

How does a new magical system evolve for you?

Like any other element of a story. I

guess it's true for most writers that ideas come in fragments – it's rare to have a completely formed outline drop on you, though it does happen. The trigger might be a phrase, an image, even a single word. Mostly it's a concept, which you try massaging into life. Most stories, fantasy or otherwise, tend to start with "what if?" Basically, the question is "How would the world be if...?" I've written quite a few stories based on the "what-if" principle. Examples? Let's see, I've used how would it be if a fatal disease appeared that only infected people who believe in God. What if children were regarded as vermin, literally. Suppose every living creature on Earth woke up one day incredibly fat. What if money was really an alien life-form. Those are random examples, but you get my drift. The point is that it's a process of extrapolation. You take an idea like any of those and ask yourself some fundamental questions about it. Perhaps having been a journalist kicks in here for me, because the questions are the classic who, what, where, when, why and how. Take *Quicksilver Rising*. Once you've thought of a magical system like that, all sorts of ramifications occur. For example, in a world where magic has a monetary and social value, people are going to do what they do with currency in our world. So you'd have counterfeit magic; bootleg magic; fabulous magic that aggrandizes its rich owners; or meagre magic as a comfort for the poor. You make your concept evolve. One of the great clichéd questions asked of writers is "Where do you get your ideas from?" I reckon most writers dread that question not just because of its familiarity but because we often don't know. What we do know

is what we do with them once they arrive. Actually, I think it's a bit strange that people should ask where our ideas come from, because everybody has ideas. I'm not being arrogant, but I already have more than I'll live long enough to write.

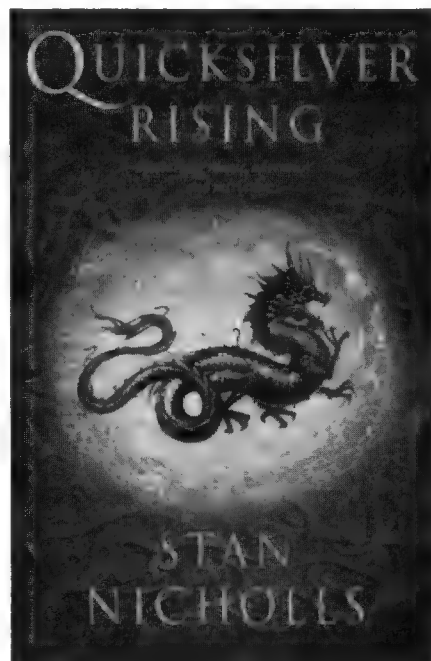
Why do you think magical systems need to be logical to be successful? This is magic, after all!

Because an underpinning of logic is essential to all elements of fiction – to make it plausible. If you have some kind of magical system in your story it has to be as believable as the culture you invent to house it. It must have internal logic, just like your political set-up, the social order, the flora and fauna, or the behaviour of your characters. I try to make the magic like science in the real world, with rules and boundaries. But I wouldn't want to give the impression that I'm besotted with magic as a real possibility. I don't believe in it – I'm sceptical about a lot of things – but it's a damn good story device.

How does magic in a story affect the plot? Are you tempted to use it as an easy way to solve a difficult plot situation? It can entirely determine the plot, of course, if it's central to your story. At the very least it should be integral, or else why have it at all? But it can't be an end in itself; it has to be one of the factors that affects your characters. There has to be some interplay between it and them, because stories are about people. In my previous trilogy, *Orcs: First Blood*, for example, one of the McGuffins is that the magic is going away. The power is being trashed by marauding incomers – who happen to be humans – as they despoil the land. Which means all the indigenous races are having to adjust to the chaos of a post-magic world. Except the orcs, who never had the ability to command magic in the first place. So the threatened absence of magic is creating a power-shift.

I tend to see magic as a neutral energy, a bit like electricity. And in the same way that electricity can be used to power a kidney dialysis machine or an electric chair, the magic is coloured by the intent of its users. It isn't good or bad; it's a positive or negative force depending on the characters it filters through. It's back to people again, in other words. I think it's a terrible cheat to use magic to resolve difficult situations, and I try hard to avoid the "with one bound he was free" syndrome. That short-changes the reader and indicates a lack of imagination on the writer's part.

Your books always seem to contain some element of humour. I'm thinking



of scenes like the dragon at the door of the inn in Quicksilver Rising. Why use humour in otherwise serious stories?

I don't seem capable of writing anything that doesn't have at least a bit of humour, even if it's of the gallows variety. I don't apologize for that. Humour is one of the range of emotions people display in any given situation, even dire ones. Especially dire ones, very often. It's as essential a part of the human psyche as love, hate, compassion, revenge, stupidity, strength, weakness or any other facet, and as such it'll always feature in my writing. The other thing, and I know I run the risk of sounding pretentious here, is that my attitude to the conventions of the genre is to both respect them and to try subverting them. Fantasy is robust enough to have the piss taken out of its tropes; to have some of its cherished assumptions questioned, twisted or gently sent up. I don't do this cynically – the challenges are built on affection. The actual function of the scene you're referring to – where two characters with differing views of magic are confronted by one of its animate products – is to show a little bit more about the world the story is set in, as well as illustrating those characters' personalities.

Do your characters arrive fully formed? At what point do they start acting with a mind of their own?
Sometimes they arrive complete. But it's rare for even a fully developed character not to change once the writing starts. The thing about characters "taking over" really is a truism, for me at least. Sometimes they start doing it quite early on, other times they hang back before letting you know the way they want to go. It's wise to listen to them. Even if they seem to be pulling you in a direction you hadn't anticipated, they're more often right than wrong. It's a strange thing, and it sounds a bit crazy, but I've long accepted it.

Did you get any unexpected chemistry happening when you put your characters together for the first time? Or do they always behave impeccably?
I'd hate to think that my characters might behave impeccably! There are always surprises when your characters first meet on the page. I'd be disappointed if there wasn't. It's the "suck it and see" aspect of writing – no matter how meticulously you might have planned things, you don't really know how it's going to go until you start mixing it. A writer must be responsive to the unexpected; in fact, it's to be welcomed. A novel that went exactly to plan would be lifeless, I think.

I had thought that your characters weren't based on real people, but I can't help but wonder whether Kinsel Rukanis, the classical singer in Quicksilver Rising, was based on yourself. How much of yourself have you written into him?

I'm quite taken aback at the very idea. No, Kinsel isn't based on me. Not consciously anyway, because there's always the argument that every character contains some shards of the author. Actually, I'm quite flattered by you thinking it might be autobiographical. Kinsel is a much better, more principled person than I am. He's a militant pacifist, prepared to suffer greatly for his belief in non-violence, whereas I'm pacifistic to a point, and certainly nowhere near as brave. He's a renowned singer and I can't hold a note. I suspect the only thing we really have in common is our collar size.

It's not strictly true that I don't base my characters on real people. I've done it once or twice. In a previous book I based a real low-life, snivelling little scumbag on somebody I once worked for who treated me quite appallingly. The physical description of this unpleasant character was the real person to a T, and I even gave the character practically the same name. Funny thing is, I happen to know that the person I drew from read the book and didn't recognize himself. I gave him a horrible death, of course – the character, that is!

Jennesta, the sexual sadist witch queen in the Orcs trilogy, was based on a composite of two real women I knew. Not that either of them were murderous despots with a predilection for eating fresh human hearts and ruling the world, I hasten to add. Well, they didn't eat human hearts anyway. That was a case of taking various character traits from both these real people and melding them. I think that's something I do a fair bit – a dash of somebody from here, a jot of someone else from there. The characters Serrah Ardacris and Tanalvah Lahn, in *Quicksilver Rising*, are blends of four or five people I've known.

When members of royalty appear in your stories they're often depicted as stark raving bonkers or just plain nasty – Queen Jennesta raping somebody with a unicorn horn in the "Orcs" books or Prince Melyobar trying to literally outrun death in Quicksilver Rising, for example. Are you trying to tell us something about your attitude to the monarchy?

I don't always depict royals in a negative light. I had a noble, benign king in my "Nightshade" trilogy, for example, though I did end up killing him (and his wife, come to think of it). Admittedly I'm a republican, and

would much prefer to be a citizen than a subject, so maybe my attitudes are creeping in without me being fully aware of it. Mind you, you'd be hard put to find a crazier bunch than most royal families. All those centuries of inbreeding, I expect.

How long does it take you to create a new fantasy world?

Ah, the "How long is a piece of string?" question. Sometimes it can be quite fast. The setting for the "Nightshade" trilogy, which were young-adult novels, I worked out in a couple of days. Admittedly, that wasn't a particularly complex world, though it did require inventing a number of different lands. Usually the creation of a setting incorporates bits and pieces you already have hanging about – those fragments we spoke about earlier – and fusing them with new material as the story demands. And writing does tend to be a process of mutation, with everything changing and developing as you go along. It's a question of work beforehand and during, so to speak. As a matter of fact I probably spend a lot longer on the characters than the world. They're the most important and complex entity in a piece of fiction.

Which elements arrive first? Are these always the elements to arrive first?
There's no hard and fast rule for this. As I said, the first thing to occur is often a concept, and it can be fairly nebulous. It's not uncommon for a character to come knocking on my mind's door, and only later perhaps do I find a story to put them in. The creative process is something like a giant, multi-levelled jigsaw puzzle, some of which you don't even put together consciously. That's part of what you might call the magic of writing, and not all of it is obvious even to the writer.

What do you find the easiest pieces to create? What are the hardest?
It sounds paradoxical, but I find writing gets both easier and harder the more I do it. I'm currently on my 22nd book, *Quicksilver Zenith*, and it's still a marathon. I think it gets easier in the sense that you learn certain techniques and tricks that move things along. It's harder mainly because you're always conscious of wanting to do better than you did last time, in terms of the story you tell and how well you tell it. I have a fairly visual imagination, and generally speaking I can make a scene work if I can "see" it. Likewise, I can put over a dialogue exchange once it sounds right to my inner ear. In respect of the latter, like a lot of writers I'm constantly listening as much as people-watching. Almost everything that goes on around you can be grist for the mill.

It's true to say that the more you enjoy what you write the better it goes – I believe it reads better, too. That's self-evident, I suppose; if you aren't captivated by what you write, you can't expect a reader to be either.

How much social/historical/political detail do you create and how much of that detail actually makes it into the stories?

Increasingly I make lots of notes about all aspects of a book. But when it comes to the actual writing I employ the iceberg principle – I generally know 90 percent more about what's going on than I tell the reader, and that's especially true of the characters. It's the old "less is more" rule – another bit of writing magic. A temptation that has to be resisted is cramming in everything – all your research, all your ideas, every tiny detail of a character's life. You don't even necessarily have to go to town describing a character; it's much more effective conveying their traits through what they do and say. Respect the intelligence of your reader and leave them to fill in the gaps. It's a bit like radio in that respect – the best pictures are the ones the reader has in their own heads. You just hand them a brush and canvas, if you'll excuse the mixed metaphors.

How do you develop the geography of a new world?

You're talking to someone who once offered to navigate on a car journey from London to Devon and got us halfway to Portsmouth. A person who for years thought north was whichever way I happened to be facing. I'm not kidding. A sense of direction, let alone geography, is not my strong point. So when I'm planning a book I take especial care to get the geography right. I work out where every location is in relation to the others, and I might even draw a crude map for myself. But I don't very much care for maps in fantasy novels, and if I'm given a say I ask not to have them. They remind me a bit too much of school textbooks, I suppose, and I can't help feeling that if a writer's done their job properly the reader shouldn't need a map beyond the one you put in their head. I'd go and bring you some examples of what I mean, but I'm not sure I could find my workroom...

How do you achieve that "lived-in" feeling?

I don't see any reason why fantasies shouldn't be written like contemporary novels. I try to write fantasies as though they were thrillers. I believe in clean, uncluttered language, and I def-

initely try to avoid archaic dialogue. I can't stand all this "thee" and "thou" and "verily, my lady" stuff. That doesn't make for authenticity, as some people believe, it just reads daft. I work on making my characters easy for readers to empathize with. Like real people, my characters bleed, spit, swear and break wind. We've already established that they laugh. They get unexpectedly pregnant, have mood swings, act contrary, and display obstinacy as much as kindness and heroism. At least I hope that's how they come across. The aim is to avoid putting unnecessary barriers between readers and what you're trying to say to them. In that respect I'm a little short of overly long, densely written fantasy tomes. I tend to think that most of those doorstops would benefit by being cut by at least a third, and maybe the authors' Thesauruses shouldn't be quite so near to hand either. I like to keep it clear, keep it moving, and cut the crap. **12**

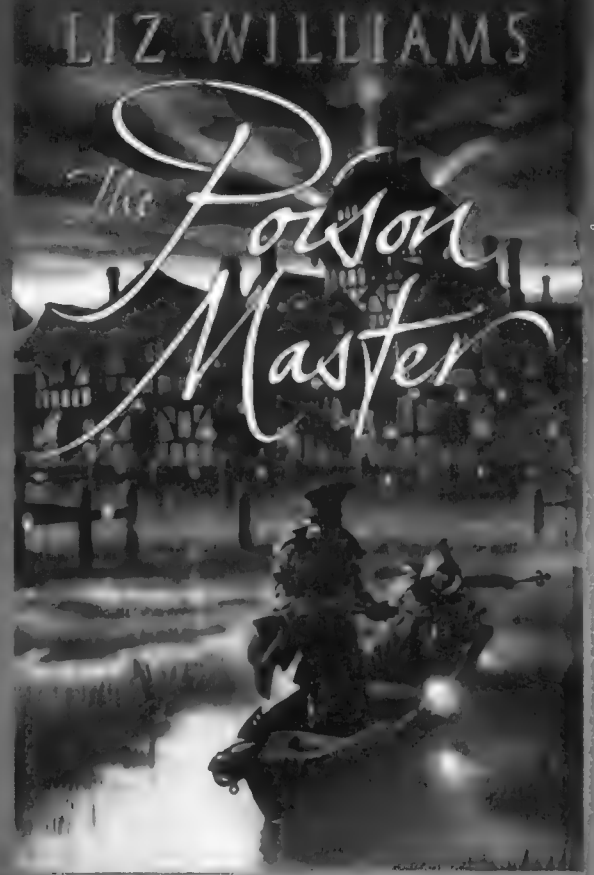
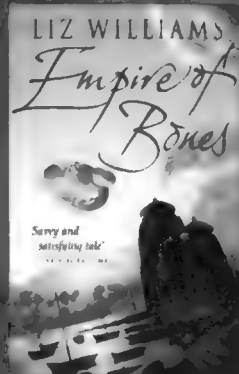
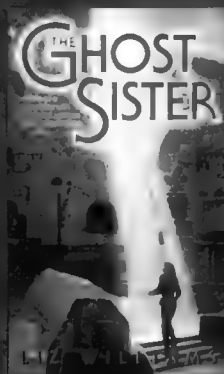
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They Are Still Dancing

Darrell Schweitzer

I awaken, slowly, out of a deeply troubled sleep to the sound of the redoubtable V__ rattling and rapping at my door. The room drifts into dull focus: the grey light of dawn through the soiled windowpane, the mildewed curtains, the bicorn hat of my office on the wooden table, my predecessor's over-large coat draped across a chair, and the silhouette of V__ at the door, alternately tapping with his knuckles on the glass or rattling the doorknob.

"Please, Sir!" he mutters, then, raising his voice, nearly shouts. "Please, Sir! Come at once."

All around me, the corpses, with whom I share the tiny apartment, seem to nod in silent agreement. Yes, I am needed. Time to get up. My dreams, such as I can remember them, were bright and filled with fire. The waking world, as always, is damp, dark, crowded. The nameless dead line my walls, 47 of them at last count, evenly divided between 23 men, 23 women, and one infant, which, for lack of any other place, I keep in a breadbox in the windowsill.

"Please, Sir!"

Grunting at the exertion, I force myself to my feet and make my way carefully to the door, stepping carefully over the outflung or stiffened limbs of my various "guests." I wrap myself in an old robe, and, for some sense of propriety, don my official hat.

I unlock the door, and, there is V__, standing in the uncertain dawn. Behind him, the fog veils but does not quite conceal the green dome of the Town Hall and white tower of the Mayor's Residence.

"Yes? What is it?"

"It has happened again, Sir. *Perversion.*"

I nod perfunctorily and close the door in his face, not even considering the matter of courtesy or lack thereof because of the simple logic that there are just too many dead people crowded into my apartment for me to have room for living visitors. Besides, I represent the authority of the unseen government and don't have to explain myself. It is only by certain acrobatics, difficult at my age and weight, that I change into my official uniform and

my predecessor's ill-fitting black coat with its impressive array of tarnished buttons. I don't know how he managed, occupying these same quarters. He was, I am told, a taller man than myself, and somewhat younger. He thought too much. He got into trouble. I know better. I am grateful to him only for his cane, which he left behind. He used it as a swagger stick. Sometimes, when my joints trouble me, I use it as a third leg.

Thus prepared, I am ready to face the world.

Outside, V__, the tavern-keeper, an illustrious citizen of our town, is waiting patiently, as he knows he has to.

It is only as we make our way carefully down the exterior stairs, stepping over the corpses that have increasingly congregated there, that V__ ventures to speak again. "I can't explain. You'll have to see for yourself. It's *horrible!*"

"Indeed," I reply noncommittally.

I know that some things are indeed horrible and many more, reputed to be, actually are not. The sin of my predecessor, his own *perversion*, about which no one will speak, which has brought a veil of amnesia as impenetrable as any of our never-quite-lifting fogs over the minds of hundreds of witnesses (perhaps myself among them) – now *that* must have been horrible.

At the bottom of the stairs, I nervously tap my stick against the handrail.

I am told, or have dreamed, or have heard it whispered, that my predecessor fell in love with a corpse, and *danced* with it before hundreds of witnesses, proclaiming all sorts of ridiculous notions before he was duly disposed of.

Above me, the Town-Hall clock strikes the hour of six, and the familiar, life-sized wooden figures creak through their perambulations before the clock face – the reaper, the sower, the man with the shovel, the coachman driving his hearse – even as, daily, with increasing pain and shortness of breath, I creak through mine.

But V__ has little patience with the infirmities of age and seems, paradoxically, all the more *impatient* in his obsequiousness as he urges me on.

I follow. Shadows are still deep in the narrow, steep streets that lead down toward the harbour. We wind through alleys. At times I have lost track of where we are, but V___ leads me on. The only person up at this hour is the tireless G___, who wheels the corpse of an old, naked woman about in his wheelbarrow. He has strewn the corpse with purple flowers, for decency's sake. I've heard that sometimes he tries to sell the flowers, with little success. I cannot let that concern me now.

At last we reach V___'s shuttered establishment. He makes a great display of unlocking the door himself, though he knows that I, as a minister of the unseen government, carry a universal key which will open any door in our town.

Inside, in the darkened common room, where numerous corpses slump on the benches or over the tables, and more crowd the shelves, he whispers, "It happened *in the night*. Of course I couldn't have seen anything. Curfew, you know."

There is no need to reply. Of course I know. It is my official duty to know. The unseen government has decreed what are called *internal curfews*, which means that the likes of V___ are confined to their bedrooms.

We descend into V___'s cellar, and he unlocks another door. He strikes a match and lights a lantern, then holds the lantern aloft, swinging it this way and that, doing his pathetic best to illuminate the whole matter, as if the evidence were plain to see.

Forty or 50 pale-faced, glassy-eyed corpses fill the room, piled like cordwood, heaped atop a couple of barrels, leaning against the wall on an old bench, with another row seated in the laps of the first.

"Well - ?"

"They have *moved*. In the night. When I and my wife were upstairs. They *moved*."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I have *dreamed* it, Sir."

"Ah." I am restrained from ridicule by the fading memories of my own dreams, which I cannot describe, but which I know, too, were disturbing. Yet now I am awake. I am a rational person, on whose rationality our town and the unseen government depend for the essential *changelessness* which is the bulwark of our lives. I pride myself on this. Unlike my predecessor, who turned out to be some kind of evil lunatic, I am a good man, a firm one, a rational one, who will do his duty, maintain order, and provide comfort to the citizenry as they perform their immemorial duty to the undecaying dead.

Therefore I snatch the lantern out of my companion's hand. I play the detective. I examine the muddy streaks on the stone floor, the position of the corpses, the way their clothing is folded or hangs or has mildewed, and as I do my confidence begins to erode. It is like that frightening, dimly-remembered dream from which I am still not certain I have fully awakened. *Here* is the corpse of an old woman whose buttocks and side are soaked with black mud. The black mud comes from where a rivulet of water has leaked in through the tiny, iron-barred window that opens into a window-well. There is a similar puddle on the floor below the window. But this woman is *on the other side of the room*, as if she got up, staggered

to join the company opposite her, and politely bade them move aside to make room for her. This *cannot be*.

I turn sharply to the startled V___ as if to demand an explanation, and all he can say is, "I dreamed that they were *dancing*." Then he puts his hand to his mouth, like a child trying to catch an utterance that has already escaped.

And I am outraged, but quietly. I maintain my sense of decorum. I merely glare at him, as if it is his fault that I begin to remember some of my own dream.

It is only much later, nearly ten o'clock, as I walk along the wharfs, that I am calm again. I have spent the last few hours behaving nervously, barking orders to people. I commanded a woman to sweep her doorstep, when she was already going to. I told the shoemaker, in his shop, to work on the right shoe first, not the left. He obeyed. I waved my cane and sent the singing pedicab driver (who, to his credit, never missed a note) labouring with his load of corpses up a steep alley to my left. I don't know where he was originally going. I don't care. It will work itself out, as those of us who serve the unseen government know things eventually do.

Now my mind is clear again. Here, on these wooden docks, where our lives have such meaning as they do. Here, where at certain irregular intervals one *feels* coming on the way one feels the onset of rain, ships appear out of the fog and, in the night, the dead are offloaded in great heaps like fish. As these ancient planks creak beneath my feet, as I accept the salutes of the scurrying citizenry, I am able to bring my mind into sufficient focus to weigh the problem carefully.

All seems to have proceeded from a dream, but this does not invalidate the truth, for even in dreams does the unseen government supervise every detail of our existence. Dreaming, then, I awoke one morning still weighed down with dread from the fading memory of whatever I might have witnessed while asleep. In this befuddled state, my prior life forgotten, I discovered myself in the loft at the top of the stairs, behind the clock tower adjoining the Town Hall. I saw my predecessor's bicorn hat, coat, and cane left out for me, and understood what office I had now assumed. It was my understanding likewise that I was not the *direct* successor, that the redoubtable V___ had actually held the position for a short time during the emergency, as the *pervert* was disposed of, but it was ultimately the will of the unseen government that I should fill the post, and V___ should return to his tavern-keeping.

Therefore I and not V___ will have to deal with the present crisis.

Clearly, corpses do not move themselves, and it is unthinkable that, once the citizens have carried them from the docks and placed them in their homes or shops or workplaces, anyone should move them. Yet throughout the day I look into troubled faces. No one is so bold as V___, to address me directly. Perhaps they are afraid of being accused, of being dealt with like the *pervert* who formerly defamed my office and nearly shattered the spiritual well-being of the entire community (until partial amnesia set in, like a merciful fog); but I can see it in

their eyes. The confectioner gazes out at me from the bay window of his shop (where several corpses sit, apparently enjoying his wares), then turns away furtively as I pass. Pedestrians on the street likewise glance into my face, longingly, then quickly look somewhere else. A few mutter abrupt words, "Nice day, Sir." "All is well, I see." "Getting a bit crowded, Sir, but we'll manage," and similar pleasantries and pieties.

I spend some of the afternoon in the town library, which is a musty, dark room in the basement of the Town Hall, which few ever frequent. There I page through musty, damp-stained volumes which hint at worlds other than our own – filled with brightly-coloured pictures of green fields, blues skies, and fiery apparitions like those in my dreams – in search of clues, or philosophical comfort, or anything relevant. This will not do. I am an old man with profound responsibilities, dawdling his time away, and I know it.

Once more I adjourn to the streets, determined to set things right. I peer in through the window of our town's single-room schoolhouse, where the children and the teacher must stand during lessons, because all the chairs are occupied by the dead. I observe that the entrance way is so crowded with corpses that the children must have to squirm through them to get inside. How the teacher does it I cannot imagine.

I smash the schoolroom window with my cane, brushing away the shards, leaving only a bare wooden frame.

All faces turn toward me, expectant, silent.

"Go in and out through the window from now on," I say.

I wonder. Have the dead here also moved? Why has this secret been kept from me? Who dares to conspire? *Perverts?* I will have an answer. There will be an investigation.

Back in my loft, after supper in V___'s tavern, I engage in my own secret *foible*. It is a mild thing, never a *perversion*. I don't fall in love with the dead, nor do I dance with them, but I do talk to them sometimes. I hope the unseen government will forgive an old man's foolishness, but at times I feel very much alone – I have never married, or else I am a widower; I can't recall which – and it is necessary to make my own accumulation of mute guests my audience for long monologues, which I would not dignify by the name of *philosophical discourses* – remembering that my predecessor was quite the intellectual, and look where that got *him*. Nevertheless, to focus my mind, to work out problems in the performance of my duties, I must speak. I begin with the courtesies. I greet my silent guests. I ask them how their day has been. There are the complaints. *Madame, can you keep your child quiet?* Not that I have any way of knowing if any of the women present ever had anything to do with the baby in the breadbox. But I do not *touch* them any more than one does, inadvertently, fumbling about in the dark, or losing one's balance (as one does increasingly with age).

This evening, I sit down, exhausted, in the sole unoccupied chair, place cane and bicorn hat on the table, and address my assembled multitudes, "Well? What do you think? What comes next?"

Outside, the Town Hall clock strikes curfew, the wooden figures creaking through their rounds. From where I sit I can hear the mechanism working.

"Well?" I say again.

My room-mates offer few suggestions. They haven't thought about the situation very much. It would be, in some circumstances, comic. But none of us are laughing.

There's a corpse in my bed that I don't remember being there before, a bloated, fat woman with a gaping mouth and a face like the belly of an enormous fish that has started to go bad. Indeed, she occupies the bed entirely, leaving no room for me. Did I *ever* sleep there myself? Perhaps not. I can't remember.

I doze at the table, with my head down, one hand on my cane.

And in the night, in the dream from which I am not sure I have ever awakened, I hear the music.

A voice whispers, "*Please Sir, come at once. It's happened again.*"

I jerk awake in my chair. The room is dark, silent.

Then I hear it. Laughter, soft, secretive, but laughter. And from somewhere far away, *music*, horns, a drum, tambourines, a muted clanging and banging more like a march than a dance.

I am stunned. I sit there in utter stupefaction. I endeavour to arouse righteous wrath within myself, but, in truth, I am merely afraid. This is not proper. It is not orderly.

I stand up, cane in hand, official hat on my head.

And I hear the laughter again, *from within the loft...*

I jerk awake in my chair, and, trembling, as if to shake off the dream from which I am never certain I have awakened, the dream which is existence itself, I gesture menacingly with my cane at the silent company around me. I don my official hat. I rise to my not totally unimpressive height (the hat and the fact that I represent the unseen government both make me seem taller) and, although it is against regulations *even for me* during the present regime of *indoor curfews*, I step outside onto the landing and observe a rare enough phenomenon, that a full moon has nearly bored through the perpetual overcast and the *green dome* of the Town Hall and beyond it the *white tower* of the Mayor's residence gleam as if lit from within by spectral light; but on the stairs below and through the streets of the town I also observe something completely impossible.

The dead are moving. Gracefully, like wisps of cloud, they glide down the stairs, into the street, though they are not ghosts; no, they are solid enough; yet I, who am alive, seem gross and clumsy by comparison.

Struggling for a sense of outrage, cane tapping furiously, I make my way down. Even the wooden clock-tower figures, now motionless in their wooden coffins by the stairs, below the clock face, open their painted eyes as I pass. Impossible.

But in the streets, the dead are dancing. The best I can do is impersonate one of them. The mud-stained woman from V___'s tavern takes me by the hand and leads me through the streets, into the great square before the Town Hall. I can't really hear the music. It is almost like a fading memory even as I experience it, faint jangles of drum,

tambourine, and horn, but the others, I am certain, can *hear it clearly*, as they move around the square in a great, stately pavane. It is only when the wooden figures in the clock-tower arouse themselves, and *strike the hour of midnight even though it is not midnight, but much later* – that a change comes over the assembled company, as if an intelligence ripples through them like a soft tide, and I alone, the clod, the idiot, the laggard cannot sense it. But the muddy, dead woman takes pity on me and once more leads me into the procession the others have formed.

I the detective, the official of the unseen government, the rational man, must pretend to go along with this to uncover the great secret –

Yes, the secret, and why will you say that I am mad, or that I was dreaming? (Outraged, I jerk awake in my chair in the loft, don hat, snatch up cane, and come hobbling down the stairs, across the square, down the steep, narrow streets toward the harbour to behold the appalling spectacle.)

In the interests of duty, then, I have violated the *indoor curfew* and joined with the dead, and discovered their innermost secret, which is that on certain nights, such as this one, it is *they* who are alive, while the respectable residents of our town sleep or cower in their beds. It is they who move by some rhythm I cannot share, the mass of them as inevitable as an outgoing tide, pouring from all the houses and alleys and establishments of our town, scrambling out through the window I recently broke in the schoolhouse, until they are assembled on the wharfs for some inexpressible communion... and *it is not midnight, but almost dawn* when the ships appear, like black islands far away across the water, and the motor launches set out from them, bearing the great multitudes of the newly arrived dead, *whom we have come to meet*, whose secrets we will now share... but I alone *cannot*, like a single blind and deaf and dumb soul in a mass of the beatific elect. I weep. I wail. I gnash my teeth. No one pays any attention to me, not even the muddy woman from V___'s basement room.

I know what is going on here! It is *forbidden*. The unseen government surely would not allow them to *remember* the sunrise, the world of brilliant blue skies, the sea-birds, white and brilliant, soaring over our heads in the morning light, shouting with incredible voices.

No, it would be horrible *beyond words* if that were true, if the dead were able to experience what the living could not, even for a sequence of hours like a stately pavane on a certain night and morning.

It is *forbidden* and it *cannot be* and therefore it is *not*, as the fog rolls in once more (and there is no moon visible overhead) and the darkness resumes, and the newly arrived dead are left in heaps like fish on the docks (where, in the morning, the citizens will gather them up and take them into their homes); and there is no music at all; and the dancers fade away into thin air to resume their rightful places in attics and cellars and shop windows and schoolrooms.

That which is impossible, which is forbidden, which cannot be, and therefore is not, lingers only in the memory of a dream as I awaken with a start in my chair in

the loft, surrounded by the dead. I see that the redoubtable V___ has entered through the unlocked door, seething with rage. He takes up the bicorn hat from off the tabletop and places it ceremoniously on his own head.

Now he glares down me, from the great height of his authority, as he doubtless did at my predecessor, and whispers the single word, "*Pervert*," as if that is the terminal thunderclap of my existence.

But I have other ideas. He has no right to accuse *me*, merely because he has discovered me with the muddy woman from his cellar seated at my feet, with her head leaning against my lap while, fondly, I run my fingers through her hair and listen to her whispering of things I have certainly forgotten and which she and I, in some other time and place, might even have shared: blue skies, laughter, music –

How could V___ understand any of this? Frankly I find him insufferable, a prig.

He thinks he will dismiss me. *I think he has usurped this office once before in a similar "emergency" and he's getting entirely too fond of it.* Therefore I rise. I take in hand the cane I inherited from my predecessor. V___ is willing to grant the infirmities of my age this much, and is therefore caught unawares when, with a single *whack!* I smash his temple with the cane and knock him and the bicorn hat to the floor.

I have to stoop. It is a slow, painful effort, but I retrieve the hat, then, with it in hand, bow sweepingly to my guests, thank them for the pleasant evening we have shared, and explain that I must be off about my duties.

Outside, a few citizens stir in the streets. The wooden clocktower figures rise creaking from their coffins, circling up their mechanical track, to strike the hour.

And I too must make an ascent. I get out a spyglass from the pocket of my voluminous coat. It is a secret of my office, something only officials of the unseen government know, that the government of our town is *not entirely unseen*, but, if you stand on the landing outside the door and point the official spyglass which I found in my predecessor's pocket at the very pinnacle of the *white tower* which is the Mayor's Residence, you can discern, through a tiny window, the *Mayor himself*, or at least the silken top-hat he wears as the sign of *his* office. He sits with his back to the window, in a high-backed chair, so you only see the hat, and if you watch for a long time, sometimes you can see it turn or nod. That is all. That is quite enough. I have foreknowledge that the ascent is difficult, especially for one of my age and girth, that in places there are no stairs, and one climbs grasping iron rungs while dangling over terrifying heights. I know that there are *no corpses* in the *white tower*, that it is a conduit to another world, which the dead have remembered to me so beautifully and so passionately. I know that the Mayor waits there, as guardian and gatekeeper and judge, that he waits for us all, and I, now, must ascend and explain myself to him.

Darrell Schweitzer's most recent stories here were "The Fire Eggs" (issue 153), "Envy, the Gardens of Ynath, and the Sin of Cain" (issue 178), "The Runners in the Maze" (issue 186) and "The Most Beautiful Dead Woman in the World" (issue 189). The above new piece is a sequel to the last-named.

Grim news from Darren Nash, senior editor at Earthlight – a position for which he gave up a well-paid marketing job after assurances that this Simon & Schuster UK sf/fantasy imprint would continue to be supported by the parent company. Now the corporate bean-counters have struck, with a vast S&S shake-up: Earthlight will be abolished at the end of 2003, while Darren gets the push in late September. Unsurprisingly he says: “I’m desperately disappointed, appalled, disgusted...” The Earthlight authors, some awaiting contracts for their next series novels, may not be entirely comforted by MD Ian Chapman’s announcement that they “will be published on the Simon & Schuster and Pocket lists where they will be given the same profile and commitment as before, but will enjoy the benefits of belonging to the main body of the fiction list.” These benefits, judging by the fate of Christopher Priest’s *The Separation* in that “main body,” could include zero publicity budgets and clueless marketing; Darren laments: “The trade press have printed Chapman’s corporate double-speak without mentioning the obvious loss of focus on genre titles.” Earthlight’s founding editor John Jarrold wrote: “I’m left with an emotional response: sadness and depression. Having moved from Random House to S&S in May 1997, after discussions about launching a new genre list with Nick Webb, the then-MD, Earthlight took up my life until I left the company in July 2002. So I feel that five years of my life, heart and soul, has now gone for nothing.”

THE BATTLE OF PICO

Raymond Briggs, in his autobiographical retrospective *Blooming Books*, reveals that his notorious personal eccentricity began early in life thanks to his mother – who, he insists, was an inspiration for Fungus the Bogeyman. (*Independent*, 22 July) The mind boggles.

Simon Clark offered an astronomical simile: “Like total eclipses, the chance to write a Dalek story only happens once in a blue moon.” (Telos Publishing press release)

Harlan Ellison’s piracy suit against AOL has progressed (following a Californian court’s adverse ruling in March 2002) to the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals – one level below the Supreme Court.

Lisa Goldstein had an “As Others See Us” moment at a class on copy-editing fiction: “The instructor handed out a leaflet, and the first thing on it

ANSIBLE LINK-1



DAVID LANGFORD

was a list of the different types of fiction we will have to copyedit. First there was ‘Art,’ then ‘Entertainment,’ then ‘Dreck.’ And ‘Dreck’ consisted of – you guessed it – ‘fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, suspense’... After the class I went up to her and told her I was a writer. ‘And I guess I write’ – big show of looking at leaflet – ‘here it is, dreck.’ She did apologize, which I suppose is progress. Later, though, studying the leaflet, I realized that ‘Entertainment’ is dreck that she likes to read.”

Quentin Tarantino pays homage to sf in his upcoming film *Kill Bill*, according to a fragment of opening screenplay published in a UK newspaper. BLACK FRAME / QUOTE APPEARS: / “Revenge is a dish best served cold” – credited not to the usual sources like *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) or any number of 19th-century proverb collections, but as “Old Klingon Proverb.” (*Independent Review*, 22 July)

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Still Yet More Awards. The John W. Campbell Award for best SF novel of 2002 went to Nancy Kress for *Probability Space*, and the Theodore Sturgeon Award for the year’s best short SF was won by Lucius Shepard’s “Over Yonder” (*Sci Fiction*). • Bob Graham’s children’s fantasy *Jethro Byrde – Fairy Child* won the Kate Greenaway Medal. • Seiun Awards are for work translated into Japanese. Novel: Robert J. Sawyer, *Illegal Alien*. Short: Greg Egan, “Luminous.” • Mythopoeic Awards. Adult: Patricia A. McKillip, *Ombria in Shadow*. Children’s: Michael Chabon, *Summerland*. Scholarship/Inklings: Michael D. C. Drout, ed., *Beowulf and the Critics* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Scholarship/Other:

Graham Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World*.

As Others See Us. Max (Jennifer Government) Barry is yet another author who defines sf by futuristic gadgetry and regards this with Atwood-like alarm: “I had the idea for a story set in an ultra-capitalist world for a long time. But I didn’t want to write a science-fiction book with laser guns and flying cars. I was more interested in writing a social fiction: taking the world we live in now and tweaking it a bit.” (*Orbit Ezine* 60) Of course no sf author could create that kind of thing. *The Observer*’s reviewer agreed: “The point of the dystopian satire, of course – as opposed to pure science-fiction – is that its imagined world is both recognisable and chillingly possible...” (27 July)

Clarion (East), the long established (since 1968) sf writers’ workshop, lost its funding from Michigan State University – apparently as a result of a cash crisis affecting the whole state. A fundraising campaign began with Clarion co-founder Kate Wilhelm’s donation of \$5,000. More at www.msu.edu/~clarion/, which also reveals that Wilhelm is writing a history of Clarion.

R.I.P. Alex Gordon (1922-2003), London-born film producer and screenwriter, died in LA on 26 June; he was 80. His 1950s genre credits include *The She-Creature*, *Day the World Ended*, *Voodoo Woman* and *Atomic Submarine*; he also wrote *Bride of the Monster* for Ed Wood. • Matt Jefferies, designer of many series props for the original *Star Trek*, died on 21 July aged 82. Remember the USS *Enterprise* “Jefferies Tube”? • Peter Redgrove (1932-2003), UK poet, author and playwright, died on 16 June aged 71. His novels – two co-written with his wife Penelope Shuttle, who survives him – are mostly fabulations and occult fantasies; he also wrote poetry with an sf flavour for *New Worlds* in the 1960s.

Thog’s Masterclass. *Relativity Dept.* “London was a city of ghosts, some deader than others.” (Mark Billingham, *Scaredy Cat*, 2002) • *Dept of Sexy Cars for Sexy People.* “He appreciated the fact that the woman who walked beside him was young and virile by her carriage.” (Russell Thorndike, *Dr Syn Returns*, 1935) • *Dept of Unfortunate Juxtaposition.* “And they had a wonderful sail on the dancing trimaran all the way around Acadia Park Island and back to a great clam dinner. That night in bed afterwards Loolie brought it up again.” (James Tiptree Jr, “Forever to a Hudson Bay Blanket,” 1972)

Send Me A Mentagram

Dominic Green

“**H**ow does that feel?” The doctor was examining me. He had cold fingers. This was not uncommon for a doctor. He also had steel hands and rubber arms that came through the wall. That was.

“I want a charge brought against the Lieutenant who brought us in. She killed one of our men.”

“Just answer the questions and we’ll both be out of here a deal quicker. What were the names of your colleagues who died, by the way?”

I hesitated. Maybe this man had no bedside manner because he wasn’t a doctor, but a trained interrogator. They would ask us all the same questions, to test our story. Since our story was crap, we all had to reply with the same contrived answers. How, having no common ground between us, could we do that?

“Well, Amundsen –” I started; and then said, “No, really.”

He frowned through the rather thick glass. “That’s quite all right. It’s the same story we’ve obtained from two of your other associates.” Thank heaven. He continued to push and probe. “Your blood pressure and heart rate are very low,” he added disapprovingly.

“Usually doctors are quite happy about that.”

“Normally quite low, is it?” he said, in the way a G.P. might ask, *Normal for you to have a jam jar up there, is it?* “Body fat level’s quite low too,” he added.

“Sorry. I’ll try and eat more and exercise less. You can

level with me. I’m a doctor too. Do we have any hope of surviving this thing or not?”

He stared through the glass. “I can level with you because all subjects exposed to it have died. No, you probably don’t.”

“How are you going to treat me?”

What was that word? Chassignite? Thought it was an ancient Tribe of Israel. Asked Jörgen to look it up in the doctor’s bible. But it could have been a rock, like Dolomite. Or a car, like a Turboflite. Or a popular brand of fizzy piss, like Bud Lite. Or –

“We have a couple of botulism antibiotics that were flown in in the last few hours from Ascension. I don’t hold out much hope for them. We’ll try one of them on one of your shipmates, the other on another.”

“What use is that going to be? It’s not gas gangrene you’re dealing with.”

(Araldite, Aragonite, Cordite, Lewisite –)

He stared back through the glass. “Oh, really. Then what, in your inestimable opinion, are we dealing with, Doctor?”

(Aerolite, Siderite –)

“Something new. Something quite out of this world.” Those few words saved my life. For a while.

It was three weeks into the Snowball War. No casualties had been reported as yet, but an illegal Argentinian hotel

casino had been destroyed on the Drake Peninsula, and its guests and staff taken as prisoners of war. The US attack submarines *Los Angeles* and *Philadelphia* and two Russian hunter-killers thought to have been of the Alpha class were cruising under the ice, but the tour operators judged they would never dare torpedo a civilian vessel in waters where a human being could freeze to death in under a minute. The Papa Pingouin incident had not yet happened. So they continued to chug happily along the coasts all the way round the continent from Queen Maud Land to Mount Erebus, little realizing exactly how much of the politicians' rhetoric blustering across the airwaves actually was for real.

The *Crux Australis* was just such a vessel – owned by a large, well-respected cruise-ship company operating out of Durban, she was of necessity smaller than flagship vessels such as the *KC3* and the *China Star*, and there was no outdoor swimming pool on board. But she was a state-of-the-art ship built in Portsmouth, the last gasp of Britain's dockyards before lack of civilian top-up business had obliged even the British Royal Navy to order its fleets from Korea, and she incorporated all the very latest innovations that allowed a vessel to operate in Antarctic waters. There was an indoor swimming pool, kept carefully heated whilst the *Crux* was in southern waters, and hot-and-cold plumbing in 100 double-glazed cabins. There were even cabins looking out below the waterline, where passengers could goggle at the squillions of tiny sea creatures gobbling in all the oxygen packed into supercharged Antarctic-Circular waters. There were heated deck rails specially designed not to cold-weld to a careless onlooker's leaning arm. There was anti-iceberg radar above the water, and anti-iceberg sonar beneath it. Nothing (short of a torpedo, which the US and Russian governments were understandably reluctant to deliver) could go wrong.

Something had gone wrong.

We watched the ice drift past us, deceptively like an electric-blue version of dry land. It was that deception that had nearly bought us a watery grave. The berg had been spinning in its lead, and had suddenly exposed a half-kilometre promontory sweeping straight round towards us like a haymaker swung by the Great God Thor. Luckily Mr Bang had noticed and swung the wheel in time, and this vessel had a rudder considerably stronger than the *Titanic*'s.

We still hadn't been able to work out the engine controls, but it was only a matter of time. And beyond the berg, in any case, was nothing but open sea and Africa. If we were truly unlucky, we might hit South Georgia on the way.

The ship made me feel foolish, and at the same time insulted. Way across the fjord on board the *Fram*, the rest of our crew were huddling below decks sleeping during their free periods because the cold made anything else impossible. Up here, these people had waterbeds and air conditioning.

Had *had* waterbeds and air conditioning.

I opened the quadruple-glazed French windows that adjoined the great ballroom, and – ignoring the sucking

rush of air that tinkled every chandelier – stepped in and slid the doors shut behind me. Someone – not us – had left a trail of dirty bootprints across someone else's lovely clean floor.

Jörgen was bending over one of the bodies. It was that of a teenage girl, an African, one of the rich Jo'burg families, no doubt. She was lying in the middle of the lovely clean floor, gripping a gold crucifix wound around her neck. Although she was African, trying to divine that fact from her facial features alone was like staring into a Magic Eye picture, as her entire face was a pattern of muscles, fat deposits, and blood vessels. The skin of her face had been flayed away; and by the grinding set of her teeth, this had happened while she had still been conscious and contemptuous of such trivialities as biting clean through her tongue.

Jörgen was leaning down to her to obtain a pulse.

"Everyone on this ship is dead," I said. "Don't touch her. What killed her may kill you."

Jörgen checked the pulse. He looked up and smiled gently. "Yes. You're right." He straightened up. "Anyway, the temperature has got to be pretty much below zero in here. No micro-organism is going to be moving around under these conditions."

I was surprised. The last week's sailing in *Fram* had made me view temperatures below zero as normal. But he was right – temperatures below zero weren't right for an air-conditioned ballroom, even this close to the Pole.

"One of our boys must have left the door open," I said.

Jörgen shook his head. "There's a thermostat on the wall. Look at it."

I looked at it. Someone had set the desired temperature to minus ten below.

"It's the same below decks, in the cabins – all round the ship," Jörgen said. "There's a swimming pool down below with a surface of ice on it. And not a window open in the ship."

He was bending to check another body as he spoke. This time, I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"No. Stand up, and get away from them. We are leaving, Jörgen. That's an order."

The Marine Corps woman was back – this time with a white coat on, and a surgical mask that covered only the bottom part of her face rather than an NBC mask that covered all of it. She was obviously coming to trust me more.

"My, what pretty eyes you have, Lieutenant," I said.

Beside her, the male Navy doctor hovered.

"I'm going to do a deal with you," said the lieutenant. "Assuming that you really are a doctor, you might be just as much use to us in your professional capacity as you might as an experimental subject. If you can provide us whatever assistance you can, we'll keep you alive as long as we can."

"I feel truly honoured," I said.

"Don't be. Although we really need doctors right now, there are only three of them on board this boat. Two of them are us, and one of them is you. Top brass won't let

us have more than two M.D.'s on the containment vessel, in case of security leaks. Half of our men stationed south of the 60th Parallel still think they're protecting baby seals."

"But they're not. They're stopping something getting out. Something you're scared you might be responsible for."

She nodded. "Ever hear of Mars at Home?"

I shook my head. Then, I felt a glimmer of recollection.

"Hang on, yes, I do. Big Antarctic research project involving Russian and American scientists, right? Your president and theirs got together and did some public face-saving after you cancelled both your Mars programmes. You couldn't afford to go to the Red Planet, so you were going to look for ways in which Mars had already come to Earth."

She winced at the mention of "face-saving," but nodded. "Essentially, it was a huge Martian meteorite collection project, and huge meteorite collection projects, thankfully for us, tend to happen in Antarctica. Meteorites fall everywhere on Earth, you see, but in Antarctica, they fall into deep ice, which then gets pushed up when the ice sheet flows over a submerged mountain range. All the meteorites come up together. So all you need to do is to find the icefields, and you've found the meteorites."

"A chassignite is a type of meteorite," added the male doctor. "As I think you probably suspected already."

I nodded. "The doctor on the *Crux* had already put it in resin and shoved it on his desk. He was using it as a paperweight. That's why your guys missed it."

He looked at her, and she tore off a Post-It from a pad on the desk and began writing a Memo to Self. He looked back at me.

"A chassignite, though, is a very special type of meteorite. One that used to be a piece of Mars. One expelled by a volcanic eruption or minor asteroid collision with Mars maybe millions of years ago. There aren't many of them, but we reasoned, if we collected a few million meteorites, we might find a few hundred chassignites."

I was beginning to understand, though understanding was not as pleasant as I'd hoped. "The first evidence of life beyond this planet came from a Martian meteorite."

He nodded, hesitated, and then said: "Now we think some of that life... may be inside you."

"You mean this skin-eating thing comes from Mars?"

"That's what we suspect, yes. We had a Mars meteorite preparation facility in the Allan Hills, inland from where the party from the *Crux* said they found their own chassignite. Maybe the *Crux* threw their meteorite overboard – we didn't find any trace of it anywhere on the ship."

"In any case, the South Polar Research Station lost contact with the Allan Hills base around ten weeks ago. They sent out a team to investigate. They lost contact with their rescue team. Then they sent in a third team which got out with three of its complement still alive. They died around 36 hours later, after we had surgically removed around 95% of their body surface." He frowned apologetically. "We weren't as good at arresting the spread of infection back then."

So he had been part of the South Pole Station staff. The Marine Corps doctor bustled out of the room, leav-

ing me alone with him.

I tapped on the glass, an indication for him to move closer. He looked at me nervously, then looked all round at the very large bolts on the glass, then leaned up close enough for me to see his very bad skin.

"Want me to tell you why you don't have to worry?"

He looked nervously in the direction of the door. "I can't make any sort of deal with you."

"Scared she'll kill you too?"

He twisted his lips. "Somebody would. Believe me. This is the military. Killing is what we do. Why do we not have to worry?"

"Because the rats on the ship are still alive."

He appeared to absorb this. But it was a hollow sham. He had a neoprene brain. I tried again.

"The disease specifically targets human beings, not rats – not even, apparently, penguins, or I'm sure your expeditions to Fryxell would have noticed. It's a thing that evolved on Earth. It's evolved to eat people, and it's evolved to eat them jolly well. It's pure coincidence that your meteors happen to land on the icecap. Ancient killer diseases are most likely to come at us out of the icecaps. If this bug is as dangerous as you say it is, it would have wiped out everyone who came into contact with it the last time it was seen by Man, and if it wipes out everyone it can infect, the disease dies, right? Except, of course, that that's wrong – the disease can simply wait a couple of thousand years in suspended animation in contaminated ice under the polar icecaps, and then –"

The doctor twisted two ends of a handkerchief halfway up his nostrils to his brain and snorted. "We're already ahead of you on that one. Some of us also reckon this disease isn't new. It's very similar to something the ancient Romans seem to have known of – admittedly in only one word, 'Mentagram,' in all their texts –"

"What's a Mentagram? A telegram sent by psychics?"

"The actual root word, so I'm told, is 'Mentagra.' Literally, 'Chin Disease.' They thought it was transmitted by kissing, because it was first noticed on the mouths of victims. Of course, this disease is airborne, but it also tends to infect the outside of the mouth and nose first. Bad air gets inhaled there. From the mouths and noses, Mentagra then worked its way down to the neck, chest and so forth if it wasn't stopped, just like our bug. It's all in Pliny's *Natural History*, Book 26, first century AD. One of our C.O.'s was a Classics major." He inspected the handkerchief, not appearing to be happy with what he found. "But that means very little. A meteor from Mars could have hit ancient Rome in the first century AD just as easily as, I don't know, Phoenician traders could have spread a landborne plague from the South Pole."

"The Phoenicians didn't get to the South Pole. And they were all wiped out by the time of Christ anyway."

"According to the C.O., one Phoenician guy called Giso of Alexandria set out to sail round Africa. Atishoo! And he probably got at least as far as Cameroon, by modern estimates."

He fished out his handkerchief again.

"Too damn dusty in here."

Chassignite. Meteorite. Gelignite. Dyna-mite.

And then I knew. Immediately. But I wasn't about to tell him, of course.

The only problem was, what was I going to do with the knowledge?

"You can't make us leave, Scott. There could be dying people here."

There were four of us standing around in the ballroom in arctic clothing, surrounded by places laid for dinner.

I nodded my head. "Exactly. And they could be us."

Jörgen shook his head. "I understand that you have a responsibility to us, as our doctor. But the danger is like as not very small. When what has happened has happened, the ship was much warmer, everyone was moving about, like as not no one knew a virus or a bacterium was moving with them. We know there is a danger. We can take precautions."

I pointed to the thermostat on the wall. "Those people did everything they could to stay alive. They lowered the temperature in all the rooms on board to stop the disease spreading. And it still spread. Whatever it is isn't going to be stopped by room temperature dropping below zero."

One of the two Danes in the expedition, referred to by everyone as Pedersen-med-D because there was another "Peetherson" in the expedition whose name was spelt differently, broke in angrily. "So we don't search any more for survivors? Is that because you feel so responsible to us all, I wonder, or is it that you want to save your own skin?"

"Meddy, we found corpses lying dead in the sick bay with charts prescribing them every drug in the modern physician's arsenal. On *Fram*, meanwhile, we have proprietary medicines for headaches and the common cold, painkillers for broken limbs and frostbite, antibiotics for infections. That's it. We cannot afford to take this bug back to the *Fram*."

"You're so sure it's a bug?" He gestured wildly at the corpse. "A knife could do that. A knife, or a scalpel."

"No. I've used scalpels. Look at the affected area with a magnifying glass. There's not a capillary on that girl's face cut through. You'd need to be the best surgeon who ever lived. It's got to be an organism. Maybe similar to type-two necrotizing fasciitis. I don't know."

"Then we stay here." Meddy's eyes were bright. "If it's that bad, we got to stay here."

Jörgen cut in angrily. "Are you mad? That'd mean cutting five men from the expedition – we'd never reach the Pole –"

I exhaled, and looked down at the corpse unhappily.

"No." I raised a hand, signalling defeat. "Meddy's right. He's absolutely right, and I should have had the courage to see it myself. I know the expedition's important to all of us. But this is more important. If we go back to the *Fram* now, we could infect everyone else. We have to stay here, and radio for help."

Jörgen, who was both Captain Amundsen's First and best Mate, muttered darkly to himself in Norwegian.

At that moment, the door was thrown open, and Haakon burst in.

"Scott – we've found the files on the doctor's PC."

I nodded and followed, with three Norwegians and a

Dane behind me.

One of the disconcerting facts about being an Englishman, and not a large Englishman at that, at sea with a crew of Scandinavians, was an uncomfortable awareness that you were constantly at armpit-sniffing height. Seated at a PC screen with neo-Vikings on all sides peering over each other's shoulders, the feeling was stronger than usual.

Luckily, the doctor's notes were in English. If he'd been an Afrikaner, I might have had to radio north for a translation. They spoke of an infection that had hit both crew and passengers after putting in at an inlet near Lake Fryxell, only a few days' sail from here.

"All this happened in just a few days?" said Jörgen.

"Unless he's lying, which he has no reason to do, being dead."

A voice came over my shoulder. "Some of these people are beginning to smell."

I didn't turn my head. "Then turn the thermostats down further. We're used to it."

The purpose of the trip, according to the notes, had been ornithological and geological sightseeing. The Transantarctic Mountains are fold mountains, completely devoid of obscuring features like topsoil and, at the Lake Fryxell area, even snow and ice – a rock collector's dream. The sort of person who enjoyed spending their summer vacation in Antarctica might also enjoy a trip out there. And emperor penguins nested all along this coast, having moved here from Ross Island after egg pirates from New Zealand – the sort the Americans and Russians professed to be so mad over – had emptied their nest sites of young. Pet emperors were now all the rage in the very best society in the Russian Federation, so much so that the trade was called the Black-and-White Market. Albino emperors were even being bred by penguin fanciers who had evidently never read Lovecraft.

"We're going to have to use the radio," said Meddy, breaking out of a conversation in either Danish or Norwegian – I couldn't tell the difference – with Haakon. "Amundsen won't like it."

"I don't like it either," I said. "We'll alert every US submarine and destroyer for miles. We're in violation of the hundred-kilometre exclusion zone. They'll put our whole ship under arrest and tow us back to Ascension Island while some Malagasy bastard cruises up and down the Queen Maud coast netting icefish to his heart's content. They haven't the ships to cover the area and they know it."

"I heard the Brazilian fishing fleet is operating submarine trawlers," said Haakon.

"I'm not quite sure how that would work," said Meddy. "How would you haul in the nets?"

I read on. The disease had appeared only hours after the last passenger came ashore from Victoria Land. It killed by "massive and sudden facial necrosis spreading from the nose and mouth, in a manner similar to hospital gangrene."

"Gangrene," said Meddy. "Frostbite causes gangrene. They had frostbite." He clapped Haakon on the back. "All right, see? Frostbite!"

The direct cause of death, I read, might have been heart seizure, or might have been suffocation. It had been impossible for the doctor, whose name had been M. J. Phillips, to determine whether a patient's heart had stopped due to hypoxia or sheer terrible pain. He had tried to keep some alive by artificial respiration, but had, according to his notes, "just succeeded in breaking the ribcage." He had first suspected a simple dermal staphylococcus infection, and had tried successively more heavy-duty antibiotics, working his way up to vancomycin on his first patient. Vancomycin was and still is the nuclear weapon of antibiotics, the one you have but shouldn't use, because its use only exposes bacteria to it and increases the risk that they'll mutate and we won't be able to use it next time. It is normally only used to treat MRSA. Our doctor had had only a little vancomycin, and it hadn't worked. His notes showed that he'd been desperate enough to go through every other disease known to cause skin lesions in his quite well-stocked little medical library, literally ticking each off page by page, until finally coming to the same conclusion as myself. Not common gangrene, and not gas gangrene either. Hospital gangrene, otherwise known as necrotizing fasciitis, for which the only known cure is removal of the affected tissue. This was not a thing which would have been welcomed by a poorly-paid ship's doctor in the middle of the South Atlantic with few proper operating facilities and a ship full of passengers, some of whom would have been capable of suing the pants off him, and some of whom would have been capable of having him shot next time he went out of the front door to his car in Durban. He was not, however, any mad scientist experimenting blindly on a group of god-given guinea pigs. When he'd begun to contract the disease himself, he'd begun to take off his own facial musculature with rubber gloves and a scalpel in the mirror. He'd got about halfway across his face before he'd died. Of course, the patients he had hardly treated at all had been the ones that had survived longest. So the world rewards a dying man doing his very best.

I heard Jörgen, who had been smoking in the corridor, swear in something Scandiwegian. "Damn ship's full of rats! I stop you, you bastard –"

I froze at the keyboard.

"DON'T TOUCH IT."

He stopped dead, with a steel vacuum cleaner pipe in one hand.

"What? We not allowed to touch rats now?"

"It's alive," I said.

He grinned stupidly. "Not for long!" He hefted his cleaner pipe like one of his Viking forebears.

"Ever hear of hantavirus?"

That took the fury of Odin out of him. The pipe went down.

"Hanta-what?"

"Rats carry it. It kills people. It kills people really well. Twenty-odd cases at modern, well-equipped hospitals in the US, i.e., not pissant doctor's surgeries on board ship, had a 50% death rate. What I'm saying is, the rats might be this organism's vector. You want your lower gut to slide out of your arse bleeding, go ahead, swat the furry fucker."

Meddy was wide-eyed. "Rats spread Black Death." He liked the statement so much he repeated it in a different format. "Black Death, that's spread by rats."

"Yeah," I said. "Norwegian fucking brown rats, maybe. Maybe you ought not to worry, hey. Maybe you guys are immune."

Jörgen shook his head. "No. No, it's not bubonic plague. Plague victims have, you know, black sores under their arms?"

"For your information," I said, still staring into the screen and typing at the same time, "it has never been conclusively established what organism was responsible for the Black Death. Most people think bubonic plague. Some think anthrax. Some even think hantavirus. It might even have been some sort of weird bug no one had never seen before and we've not seen since." I licked my lips. "No one showing any signs of fever yet?"

They examined each other cursorily. Soon, they would be examining each other minutely. "No, said Meddy."

"Better signal *Fram*," I said. "Project Red-White-Blue is finished."

Project Red-White-Blue was a voyage of Anglo-Norwegian cooperation rising out of the weird vision of only one man – Thor Amundsen. A distant relative of the great polar explorer, he'd narrowly failed an examination to become one of ESA's first Mars astronauts on medical grounds. Perhaps his failure to qualify for the vanguard of the future had made him retreat back into the past, but Thor, a likeable man from Bergen who spoke Norwegian, English and Russian fluently, had skied at olympic level, and had a Master's degree in Engineering from Oslo university, had set himself a task that, for the men who had originally accomplished it, had been as difficult and as dangerous as Armstrong's first moonshot. He had decided that, on the hundredth anniversary of his distinguished ancestor's historic conquest of the Pole, he would do likewise, in exactly the same manner. No satellite navigation. No digital radio. No radar. No sonar. No petrol-driven ski-doo. Thor was going to the Pole, and he was going to take in every bit of suffering his ancestor had suffered, just as Amundsen himself had been driven to suffer the same agonies his patron, Nansen, had endured.

Initially, he had raised the money by claiming he was going to carry out Amundsen's abortive North Polar trip of 1910, which had been a cover story for his ancestor's real destination. I suspected I had been recruited out of a possible 20 applicants, all with identical qualifications, only because of my name. It's only my first name that's Scott, but at least, Thor had said in the interview, they would have one Scott and one Amundsen on the team. I'd learned later that the recruitment of at least one British member had been a major factor in getting a City merchant bank to sub Thor 200,000 pounds for expedition expenses.

Roald Amundsen had recruited his entire crew for a journey to the Arctic, borrowing a ship, the *Fram*, off his friend Nansen, whom he knew to be planning a South Polar attempt himself, and then suddenly changed course at Madeira and announced they were heading for the other end of the world. We should have realized that

Thor Amundsen was going to do likewise.

Going for the South Pole was insane – not merely spitting in the eye of an old friend, as it had been in 1910, but genuine suicide. Since September 2009, American and Russian warships had been patrolling circumpolar waters enforcing the Antarctic whale sanctuary. One Norwegian whaler, the *Seaswan*, had already been shot full of machinegun holes by an overenthusiastic Russian destroyer captain. For some reason, the Americans and Russians, so reluctant to intervene when people were killing, raping and eating one another in Rwanda, Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Quebec, really meant business this time. No torpedoes had been used as yet, but, particularly after the *Seaswan* incident, the Norwegians on *Fram* were sailing to a grudge match.

Granted, the South Pole had been being raped wholesale by big business. Huge, air-conditioned hotels had been going up all along the relatively mild “South Polar Riviera” of the Antarctic Peninsula. Heated suits allowed tourists to dive among fur seals, snowboard down icebergs, terrorize flocks of frantic penguins on jet skis (the tourists on jet skis, not the penguins, of course). All thoroughly illegal and in contravention of the Second Antarctic Treaty of 2007, of course – but then, so had been a few hundred thousand white settlers wandering across Indian land with a couple of million cattle in North America in the 19th century, and in South America in the 20th, and nobody heard anyone complaining then.

But suddenly, the Americans and Russians had got serious – incidentally boosting their Presidents’ domestic popularity ratings to an all-time high – and no-one quite knew why. Now their express permission was needed for anyone, no matter how scientific they might claim to be, to venture below the 60th Parallel. But Thor Amundsen had reckoned on turning this into the biggest European propaganda coup in history, making it all the way to the Pole under the noses of the US Navy. A wooden-hulled ship, transparent to radio waves, probably also transparent to sonar. No motors, if only the sails were in use, and hence silent to even the most sophisticated hydrophone. Nobody would be expecting a wooden ship, he reasoned. And certainly, he had been right in that we had got this far.

We had radioed *Fram*. Thor had refused to believe our story, and had insisted on coming aboard himself. I’d ordered anyone on deck to stop him doing so, on the grounds that we should stop any more of our friends and shipmates getting infected.

Right now, Jörgen was the only one in the doctor’s surgery apart from myself. It was still light, as it always was in the Antarctic winter, but the sun was low on the horizon – less a midnight sun than a continual twilight one.

“You stopped yourself earlier on,” he said. “You have not said everything you were wanting to.”

I nodded.

“At the end of the last century, a number of dead men were discovered in what had been a coalmine in Spitzbergen. There used to be a lot of heavy coalmining in Spitzbergen, you know that?”

He nodded. “They wanted to mine down here too, up

in the Transantarctics. It seemed that they would be getting permission, too, before the US and the Russians started to play hardball.”

“Mining in Spitzbergen stopped in the last century. But these corpses were special. They’d died of Spanish Flu, a disease which killed 20 million people just after the First World War. Twenty million. And you know what? The disease organisms were still alive inside them. Half the epidemiological world were overjoyed that they now had samples of a deadly virus to study and make vaccines against, and half of them were terrified. Because the reason why the bodies got found was that they’d originally been buried in an icefield. By the end of the century, the icefield had retreated – not due to global warming, oh, no, perish the thought – and the bodies were uncovered. And if that could happen in Spitzbergen, it could happen anywhere across the entire extent of the ice sheet. Any and every plague that swept Europe, Asia and North America throughout recorded history and beyond could come out of the tundra at us. In the 6th century AD, a sizeable percentage of the Eastern Roman Empire died of the Plague of Justinian, a mysterious infection from the East. We still have no idea what the plague organism was. In the fourth century AD, a plague that killed millions crossed China from west to east, and academics are still arguing whether that was smallpox or measles. Hantavirus has been in North America ever since Amerindians can remember...”

He frowned. “Are you saying this could be a disease that was buried in the ice sheet, then uncovered?”

I wagged my head, trying to shake off answering the question. “Maybe. There’ve been Little Ice Ages and Little Interglacials all through human history. Maybe the Yaga Indians from Patagonia colonized the Antarctic Peninsula during a Little Interglacial early in their history, just like the Vikings colonized Greenland. Who knows? Certainly there’s not many Yaga Indians left alive for us to ask. I read a book on them once. There are two of them left, and they’re both nuns.” I tapped the porthole glass. “There could be lost Indian cities aplenty under the ice, with diseases we’ve never even seen before.”

He was listening, but I couldn’t tell whether he thought I was crazy or not. “Some sort of frozen Indian burial site, you think.”

I looked at the screen. “They found something. Found it when they were on that trip to the Dry Valleys. The log just refers to it as ‘the Chassignite’.” I nodded to a shelf in the corner of the room. “I saw a Bible up there earlier on. Flip through it and see if you can find out who the Chassignites were.” I shifted a heavy rock encased in resin which the doctor had evidently been using as a paperweight off the sheaf of crabbily handwritten notes he’d left in addition to his computer records. The rock was sealed in a plastic bag, as if someone had collected it as a geological sample. “I just wish the bastard hadn’t seen fit to write the most important bits of his log in riddles.”

Then Mr Bang poked his big blond head into the surgery. “Scott, Jörgen – you should come upstairs right away.” Then the head was gone.

I called after him. “Hey, wait a minute! Why? Why

should we come right away?"

By the time we arrived at the ballroom, all three of the others were there, standing around the girl. Around the girl, and a long way from the girl.

"It's spread to her shoulders," said Meddy in revulsion.

Sure enough, the thin and red raw line that separated dead grey skin from dead blue veins and muscles had spread down to fill the golden line of the girl's necklace. Even in death, the unseen thing was dining.

Then Jörgen put a finger to his lips, and cupped another round his ear. I stopped and listened, and then I heard it. The noise of rotor blades.

Someone – either the Americans or the Russians – had found us.

I was glad that it was an American helicopter. Only Thor and one of the Swedes spoke Russian, and they were back on *Fram*. Besides, I had a westerner's unreasoning mistrust of Russian soldiers. We stood on deck, watching the chopper circle.

"Why doesn't he come in to land?" said Meddy. "There's a helicopter landing area."

Dirty bootprints on a ballroom floor –

"He's not landing," I said. "He knows what's down here. He didn't find us. He's been here already."

The chopper was turning, centering itself in a fjord broadside-on to the ship.

"We fucked up his plans last time. The ship was supposed to hit the ice. The evidence was supposed to have been destroyed –" I was backing away towards the steps up to the bridge. Then I started running. The chopper kept on coming. I burst into the bridge behind a bemused Mr Bang, fell onto the radio set and began twirling the dials. Nothing but static. If there was traffic out there it was digital and encrypted. I found the mayday channel, and yelled into it at the top of my voice, as if it made the goons in the chopper more likely to hear me, that we knew what they were up to, we knew they had tried to sink the ship, and above all, we knew about the Chas-signite, and that if they tried to put a hole in our hull there were functioning radio transmitters on board this ship and we'd broadcast their dirty little secret all the way from Rio Di Janeiro to Perth.

The helicopter rose up out of the fjord, flew over the ship, and carried on flying high into the sky.

The other members of the crew looked at me as if I'd had a seizure.

"It's something they don't want anyone else to have," I said. "Something they've found under the ice sheet too. That's why they've come over all green and whale-friendly."

"One of your Indian diseases," said Jörgen.

I shrugged. "Something. Or something they cooked up themselves. Something that kills quickly enough and unstoppably enough for them to be interested in it, anyway. We already know that part." I sat back into one of the few seats in the room. It wasn't comfortable. I realized, too late, that Haakon and Meddy had followed us into the bridge. They'd heard everything we'd said.

Haakon was wide-eyed immediately. "You think the people from the *Crux* have walked into a military test area?"

"Chemical warfare?" said Meddy. It wasn't as stupid an idea as it sounded. The Yellow Rain used by the Soviets in Afghanistan produced skin lesions; vigorous washing would remove it, though. It wasn't quite this single-mindedly deadly.

I shook my head. "Something similar, though. A really fast-acting virus, maybe. Tetanus, rabies and lots of other diseases can produce uncontrollable muscle spasms. But this isn't any disease that was in my textbooks."

"They're experimenting?" Meddy was poised on the edge of the handle, ready to take flight. "They've made a green sanctuary out of the whole of Antarctica just to test weapons?" He banged a console theatrically. But I felt the same way he did.

"They are not just experimenting," said Jörgen. "They've fucked up. The bug they're testing has escaped, and maybe it's more dangerous than they think, or they would have not cordoned off the entire continent."

"We've got to get out of here," said Meddy, "and warn everybody."

"That's just what we've not got to do," said Jörgen. "We're travelling in a plague ship, remember?"

"Well, what should we do? Just sit here and die like they want us to?"

Abruptly, the radio crackled. I had left it on mayday frequency, and someone was answering back.

"– military flight from *USS Tarawa* calling *SS Crux Australis*, over. Anyone alive down there? You sure were making some racket a couple of minutes back, over."

Carefully, I picked up the mike, as if handling a live snake. "This is *Crux*. Yes, there are live people on board here. Four of us, over."

"Sure as hell didn't find you on our last visit. Where were you hiding, over?"

I tried to think of a suitable hiding place. "Meat locker. Meat locker is airtight, and quite warm if you switch on the defrosting heaters, over."

"Well, I'll be damned. I could have sworn we checked the meat lockers."

The voice waited for a moment, as if allowing the fact that it knew perfectly well I was lying to sink in.

"You aware that you're still sitting on top of a serious health hazard? And also, incidentally, your ship's in violation of the Antarctic Treaty, 2007, over?"

"Only too aware, *Tarawa*. Can you come in and take us off, over?"

Voices hissed to left and right of me. "No! Don't bring them down here with us!"

"I'll do what I can, *Crux*. And I'm afraid by the powers vested in us, we are going to have to arrest you. Don't be too scared if our guys come out in big rubber suits, over."

"We'll try to keep calm." I switched off the radio.

"What the fuck are you trying to do? They'll drop some marines down here and kill us!" This was Meddy, naturally.

"Better down here than up there," I said. "They had rockets on board that thing."

"And they'll have guns when they get off it! They aren't going to take us away – that's why we thought this dis-

ease had 100% death rate, they, they probably threw any of the passengers they found still alive over the side!"

I frowned. I hadn't thought about that. "But they've already shown they won't shoot us if we can realistically threaten to get word out to the outside."

He threw his arms wide. "So they send troops down here, disable the radio, and shoot all of us, Einstein."

Haakon cut in. "He may be right. Let's send a radio message out now."

I considered it. "It might do some good. Maybe we can try it. But they may be jamming the signal by now anyway. And that pilot asked me where we'd been hiding. He sounded very interested in it. Remember, he knows that we must have come either from off the *Crux*, or from some other ship. Once he knows that other ship exists and where it is, he knows he only has to blow it and us out of the water to wipe out any proof we were ever here. But it could be 100 miles down the coast for all he knows. Guys, I don't think he saw the *Fram* when he flew past. It may take him a good few minutes to double back on himself if he doesn't want to waste too much fuel, which he might not, over the Antarctic. It's our duty to signal to *Fram* to get the hell out of here in the meantime. And it may be the only way for us to stay alive."

It convinced them. They started running and yelling at each other in Norse.

It was not a naval helicopter. It was not painted blue with big garish stars and stripes. Its operators hadn't had time to recamouflage it from a deep, businesslike green. Maybe those rockety things might have been drop tanks after all, but those machine guns were, well, machine guns.

The well-dressed American soldier was wearing rubber this winter. Five infantrymen (I counted) came out of the helicopter, all of them holding M16's in both hands. We were uncomfortably aware of the fact that we had not so much as a flare pistol among us.

We were standing outside on deck. When they got to maximum conversation distance, the leader walked up close, giving us a look at him through his faceplate. He was a she.

"Hi there. Nice to see you all wrapped up warm. Those clothes aren't exactly standard issue."

Jörgen smiled. "You have been in the army too long. There is no standard issue on a civilian ship."

She might have smiled back, but it was difficult to tell. I would not have been convinced of her sincerity in any case. "I'm not in the army, sir. I'm a doctor in the United States Marine Corps. I believe you're already aware you may have contracted an extremely virulent infection. To date, that infection has been 100% fatal. Now, let's cut the bullshit. None of you gents came off this ship. There's a possibility that other crewmen on board your own ship may also be infected. We need to know the current position of your ship, or people on board it may die."

Jörgen nodded to me in acknowledgement. You were right. "We are passengers on this ship. We hid ourselves before, because we are not used to soldiers with machine guns. We are sorry if this was an inconvenience."

Then she shot Jörgen.

She shot him to kill. He must have died instantly. Then, as if she were talking to students at an autopsy class, she stood over the body and carried on talking. The sound of the shots echoed back off the ice walls all around us like a great invisible snake writhing round the horizon.

"Next man to try and feed me a line of bullshit gets the same treatment. Where's your ship?"

"They took us on board at Lake Ryxell," I said. "Some of us were already sick. We weren't, and still aren't. We're poachers. Our ship left us there to pick up penguin eggs. We've already used the *Crux*'s radio to tell our ship where we are, and tell it to call for medical help. And that means, lady, that you are in a lot of trouble."

At first, I thought she was going to shoot me. But, I realized, I'd fed her something credible, and made us into something useful – human subjects who might have been exposed to the sickness without being infected.

She gestured with the gun. "There's a sealed container in the back of the chopper. Get into it. Don't touch anything when you get in." She smiled again. "You're about to enter the wonderful world of the experimental subject. There's a lot of all of you, which is good. Plenty of beef on the bone for tissue samples. Now move."

We moved.

My personal physician was back in the room, checking on how quickly I was dying. I was busy myself, checking through tissue samples taken from two victims who had been notified to me only as Subjects X and Y in my own miniature laboratory on my side of the glass. My laboratory had been carefully audited to include no heavy objects, no sharp objects, and no objects that could be mixed into concoctions that could hurt tiny US Marine hands. I was fairly sure that Subjects X and Y were Meddy Pedersen and Haakon Bang. They were dying far more rapidly than I was.

"I assume this cubicle I'm in has its own self-contained air recycler, like a space suit," I said.

He didn't look up from what he was doing. He was far too interested in a flap of skin he'd cut from my arm. "No, it's filtered from the air in here. The contents of the air are passed through radioactive, freeze-drying, and thermic sterilizers."

"That won't do any good. You need to open the air filter and check through it." He looked blank. "This organism is airborne, right? The air filters in these cells are sucking out all our air and concentrating it, right? So the organism goes into the air filters too. There might be more of the organism in there than there is on your patients. You shouldn't be sterilizing the air. You should be collecting it."

I could see by his expression that I had him hooked.

"But what would we collect it in?"

Just at that moment the door opened and Marine Girl walked back in wearing a paper mask, stared at me through the glass, maybe for tell-tale signs of the disease, frowned as if she were disappointed I didn't have any yet, and then left, making a note on her all-important clipboard. The doctor's eyes followed her down the corridor.

"One of your colleagues just died. It had reached his

chest before he passed out," he confided.

I didn't ask him which one. It didn't really matter.

"Saturate the filter in water," I said. "Water will contain any airborne dust component, and you've got plenty of water available; but it's unlikely to kill the organism. Take a slide and dab some of your water on it with a pipette, and you've got a microscopy sample. Remember, you've got to keep the organism alive, or you'll never be able to study it properly."

He nodded vigorously. Maybe laboratory work wasn't his strong point.

My hand moved up to scratch an itch on my chin that I had been ignoring in the hope that it was psychosomatic.

"That's how it starts," he said. "I'm sorry."

He went out.

He was very interested in his slides, and made many of them. He kept them out of the sight of Marine Girl, who I suspected was his superior and would disapprove. He studied the effect his slides had on samples of suspiciously nordic-looking skin and muscle tissue.

Then, on the second day, he began scratching his chin. By this time, you understand, I was in real pain, feeling as if the lower part of my face were already being cauterized down to the bone, at which point I began to understand how the ancient Romans, if they had indeed contracted this disease, had felt justified in resorting to such extreme measures. Needless to say, no curative procedures of even that drastic nature were attempted on me. They wanted a live specimen for as long as it took for one to die.

They began making what they called "firebreak incisions," skinless areas through which the disease would not spread. This was successful in channelling the infection into a long, narrow strip of skin that spiralled out from the point of initial infection on the chin. Later on, they said, they would make similar cuts around my neck and chest to stop the pestilence spreading lower than the head. That wouldn't stop it spreading entirely, of course – they had found from previous cases that a point of escape was needed for the infection in order to prevent it from spreading upwards. Victims whose entire heads were affected suffered such pain that they had frequently driven their heads against the walls of their cells, I was told. That, of course, would never have done. We had to be made to live out our usefulness to medical science to the full. When I say 'they', of course, I still mean only the two doctors I had seen to date; since we had been marched out of our secure container below decks, I had not seen another living soul besides those two.

I was instructed on literal pain of death not to scratch. I would, for hours on end, rather have died and scratched, but somehow I managed to convince myself not to do it. Maybe it was the indomitable human spirit that did it, but I somehow think it was more likely the immense feeling of satisfaction I got out of watching the doctor turn up to the lab one morning with a band-aid over his chin, and hide his face furtively from the other workers. He was infected, and he knew it. I caught him stealing scalpels and syringes. He didn't quite manage

to steal a syringe – Marine Girl walked in before he was able to, and he had to put the packet back on the shelf quickly. I rejoiced that night, elated in the fact that, whilst he'd accorded me the decency of a jab, he was going to attempt to cut a firebreak incision in his own face that very night without an anaesthetic. And each morning, his band-aid and mine alike grew larger.

One morning, he walked into the lab and marched right up to the glass.

"You are killing me," he said.

"Ditto," I replied.

"How did you know it would infect me?"

"Let me out," I said, "and I'll tell you."

"Now everyone on the ship will get infected."

"I know."

"Maybe everyone in the world."

"That doesn't have to happen. Let me out."

He went to open the door to the confinement area.

When the gun went off, it was like having my ears boxed with a pair of cymbals. The cell I was in was mainly metal, and it carried on clanging obscenely long after I saw the Navy doctor slide down the glass wall of the cubicle leaving a snail-trail of blood from a bullet hole.

On the other side of a great deal of glass and a great deal of blood stood the Marine doctor, staring at him with eyes that were more than ever so slightly crazy. As always, it was only her eyes that were visible over the ever-present paper mask. She was still holding a Service automatic in both hands.

"Oooh dear," I said. "Look what you did."

Her eyes moved down to where mine were already resting – on the tiny crazed gap in the glass where her bullet had hit and knocked a hole in my cage without penetrating.

"All those nasty little pathogens," I said, "spreading through that little tiny hole. Could be you're already breathing them in. Better shore up that hole quick, sister, or you might get infected."

Then she smiled, and I didn't doubt her sincerity now. The grin filled her face ear to ear. Without taking her trigger hand off the weapon, she reached behind her head, unhooked the straps of the surgical mask, and let it fall away.

She did not have much of a lower face left to smile with. She'd been contaminated longer than the Navy guy. Probably since before we'd even been taken on board the ship.

I leapt aside before she fired again. The glass, weakened by the first shot, shattered this time. She continued to fire. I was able to huddle into one corner of the window housing, where the window bolts met the metal. I felt bullets thudding against myself with only a quarter inch of steel between us. She could have walked across the room and killed me at any time she wanted. She wasn't even trying. Instead, she was screaming every time she pulled the trigger. I didn't blame her. Her face – her very beautiful face – had started disintegrating maybe from the very first day she had begun to study the plague organism, and she hadn't been able to do anything about it, hadn't even been able to explain it. All her years of military and medical training had been useless. What-

ever she'd planned to do with her life, and probably also her life itself, wasn't going to happen any more.

The military had trained her well in one respect, though; she knew exactly how many rounds she had in her weapon. The last one went into her own head. As I hadn't been quite so sure how many rounds she'd had left, I carried on cowering for a good few seconds more before poking my head back out into the sickbay.

I decided against keeping the weapon; I had no idea how guns worked, and a gun in my hand might only get me killed by someone else who did. I ignored the rows of medical cabinets in the sickbay, with their glass doors holding rows of tempting genetically-engineered medicines.

The corridor outside confirmed my suspicions. There were bodies lying slumped everywhere, every one with their circulatory system clearly mapped out on their faces. Some, but not all, of them had been carefully bundled into polythene body bags, but no further efforts had been made for their disposal. It looked like there had been more infection outside the controlled area than inside it for quite some time. Somewhere distant, engines were still thrumming faintly, but I had a distinct suspicion there was no hand at the tiller.

Poking around below decks, it took me a surprisingly long time to find the quartermaster's stores. I sat was left of the quartermaster on a comfy seat in the corner before locating what I wanted on the shelves. It took me a good few minutes to find my way through the Navy's byzantine filing system. What I wanted was dark green and slopped around inside the big cannister I found it in. The cannister was labelled WARNING, KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN, DO NO INGEST, and, for some arcane reason, HIGHLY TOXIC TO MARINE WILDLIFE AND BEES.

I ripped open the cannister with a Stanley knife and stuck my head in it. I held my head under, well beneath the surface, and felt a slight tingling sensation on my skin. I did not go as far as opening my eyes. No victim's eyes had yet been affected.

After removing my head from the cannister, I splashed the stuff around my neck and shoulders like an expensive cologne. Then, I carried a few more cannisters of the same green gunk to the nearest bathing area and had a shower in the stuff.

With the ick still running down me, I soaked a set of Navy blues in it, put them on, and, dripping, made my way back for'ard to the place I and my companions had been being held, all the time not seeing a single living soul. My companions were all dead, which came as little surprise – after all, I'd been staring at Navy Boy examining dissected bits of them under a microscope for the past three or four days. I looked into the eyes of Meddy Pedersen staring back at me as he floated in a tank of preserving fluid, recognizable by the sapphire wedding ring on his right hand, the rest of him as skinless as the Visible Man. Some of the skinless area had been removed by the pathogen, and some, more clumsily, by human beings using scalpels. One piece of surgically removed Meddy was pinned out under a microscope, kept under water to separate it from the outside air.

I peered into the microscope. Adjusting the magnifi-

cation downwards from cell-size, I was eventually rewarded with a glimpse of what I wanted, inert and paralysed by their immersion, but still only dormant, waiting for the time when the sun dried them out and they could eat and scurry once again.

"Couldn't see the wood for the trees," I said, to nobody in particular.

Dermatophagoides. The common dust mite. Except that these dust mites weren't quite so common.

Your average dust mite – 500 of which can happily live in a single gramme of dust – spends its entire lifetime feasting on human flesh. Or, to be more exact, human skin, the main component of domestic dust. One of the main reasons for peoples' allergies to the creatures' fecal pellets is the fact that dust mites are among the most beautifully-adapted creatures in the animal kingdom for feeding on human tissue. Their saliva quite simply is designed to break us down.

Normally, of course, human dust mites feed on dead skin flakes. But there was never anything stopping any dust mite genus from developing an ability to feed on live skin.

Not a virus, or a bacterium, or a Martian meteor – but a creature these so-called scientists had evidently been unsurprised to see crawling across these samples in their thousands. Every healthy human being is, after all, covered in them. No antibiotics, of course, would have done their victims any good. What was needed was a good strong dose of insecticide (or, more strictly, acaricide).

When Navy boy had started examining the contents of the air filters under water – or maybe through some other, completely unconnected route, looking at the extent of the epidemic in the outer corridors – he'd been infested. Dust mites, unlike bacteria, are capable of scurrying out of petri dishes. But I hadn't killed him. As God is my judge, I'd been preparing to save his life when I had been unfortunately prevented from doing so.

In any case, I needed to leave the ghost ship.

I found a ladder leading upwards, and eventually, a hatch. I had, on my travels, spotted a surprisingly small number of unlocked ladders leading up to hatches, and had been annoyed at being continually, inexplicably thwarted in my upward progress. Opening the hatch cover, I pulled myself upward into fresh air and sea mist. The sky was white and roaring.

I should have realized. A submarine. They would never have allowed research on something this serious to take place on a vessel not capable of being ordered to take its cargo to the bottom of the ocean. I was standing right on top of the conning tower. The boat was running slowly on the surface. I knew she was running slowly, because she had a sailing vessel keeping pace with her. They'd seen the sub steering erratically, and, although they were running like hell for safe haven in Port Stanley or Ushuaia, they'd still stopped to flash messages at the boat asking if it needed assistance. Thor Amundsen's good heart would be the death of him yet. Only a half mile distant, the running lights of two other, larger vessels – Argentine trawlermen, I learned later – showed through the fog. It seemed there was more than one Good Samaritan at sea today.

I waved at the figures on deck on the *Fram*. They

waved back. It took me some time to locate a liferaft, since they were all contained below decks, but the thing inflated most satisfactorily once I pulled the toggle, and I was able, once I had liberally doused it with insecticide, to kick it into the water streaming past the sub's gleaming hull and, running along the deck, to leap into it myself.

A cheer went up from the decks of the *Fram* as I approached her, and nets were lowered. I allowed them to help me out of the liferaft, then stopped them from lifting the raft itself up out of the water after me. The Mighty Thor was on deck to greet me.

"I won't ask why you look like a seabird covered in oil," he grinned. He pointed up at the sky. "They've been up there for about half an hour now, just going round in circles. They told us not to go anywhere near the submarine for our own safety, but they cannot stop us picking people up who are in liferafts."

That was the roaring noise. And it was growing louder. Someone shouted from the front of the ship. Looking up, I saw a grey patch of fog harden into hard diamond patterns of wings. Wings with stars and stripes printed across them.

The roaring in the sky reached a crescendo, and two streaks of fire detached from the aircraft, lancing down towards a billion dollars' worth of US Navy property. There was an Earth-Shattering Kaboom. Bits of steam and submarine came up like a geyser.

"Are they mad?" said Thor, staring at the spectacle with eyes wider than those of a rabbit in a cosmetics lab. "That's a nuclear submarine! The reactor!" He began yelling over his shoulder for the helmsman to steer us away from what might become a fallout cloud.

"No," I said. "They're not mad. Just very, very scared. When we next get to a port with a population over a million, remind me to send a letter to head of the World Health Organization in Geneva. And don't get off the ship until I've done it. I may know something the best and brightest in Washington and Moscow need to be told at a discreet distance."

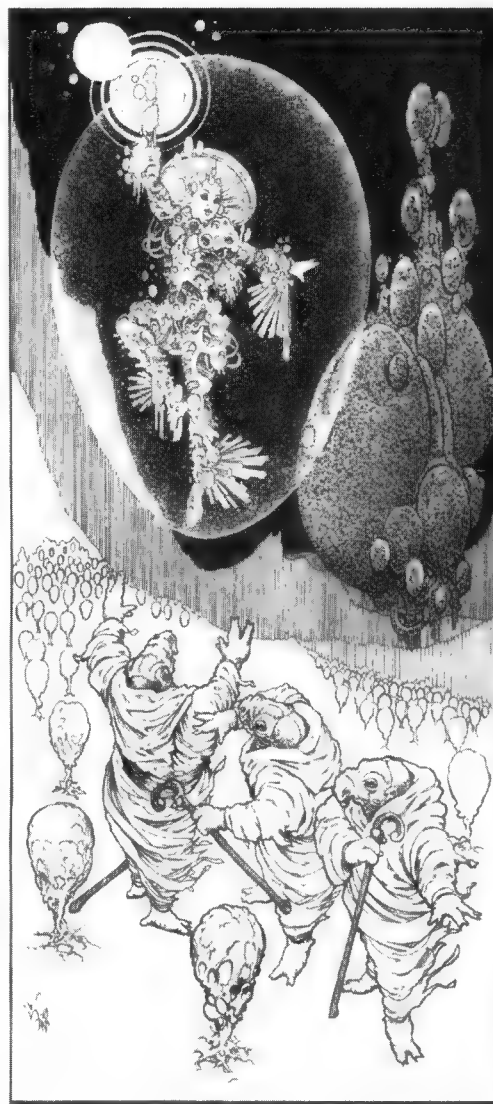
"May know?"

"It all depends on whether or not I decompose slowly over the next 24 hours. Watch me carefully."

I went down below to decompose.

Dominic Green's previous stories for *Interzone* include "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (issue 162), "Queen of Hearts" (issue 173), "Blue Water, Grey Death" (issue 175), "News from Hilaria" (issue 179), "Heavy Ice" (issue 187) and "The Rule of Terror" (issue 189). He lives in Northampton.

Hallelujah



No. 2: Manifestation of the Celestial Cheerleader

Seven Xmas cards,
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Xenocultural aspect of
The Christmas Story.

Original designs by Interzone artist Sms.
Plus a quote from the relevant religious texts.
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ANSIBLE LINK-2



DAVID LANGFORD

I write in the jetlagged wake of Torcon 3 in Toronto, the 61st World SF Convention, which I actually managed to attend.

Hugos. George R.R. Martin, a guest of honour, led up to his presentation of the best-novel Hugo by defining this in leering, lip-smacking tones, as *The Big One*. "All Hugos are created equal and free – but Joe Haldeman has *the big one*. Connie Willis also has a big one. Ursula Le Guin has *two* big ones. Fortunately, Gardner Dozois has twelve little ones. Howard Waldrop has... none at all." The presentations duly culminated with **THE BIG ONE**: Robert Sawyer, *Hominids*. "I'd like to thank J.K. Rowling for being late delivering her MS..." (This result led to what I will nervously call "some controversy" in subsequent on-line discussion.) **NOVELLA**: Neil Gaiman's all-conquering *Coraline*. **NOVELETTE**: Michael Swanwick, "Slow Life." **SHORT**: Geoffrey A. Landis, "Falling onto Mars." **DRAMATIC, LONG**: *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. **RELATED BOOK**: Judith Merril and Emily Pohl-Weary, *Better To Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merril*. **PRO EDITOR**: Gardner Dozois. Who exulted: "The golden age of science fiction is right now!" **PRO ARTIST**: Bob Eggleton. **DRAMATIC, SHORT**: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "Conversations with Dead People." **SEMIPROZINE**: *Locus*. **FANZINE**: *Mimosa*. **FAN WRITER**: Dave Langford. (23 Hugos. Has the man no shame?) **FAN ARTIST**: Sue Mason – a first win for this UK cartoonist whose work has appeared in the National Portrait Gallery.

Also at Torcon. John W. Campbell Award for best new writer: Wen Spencer. • The Los Angeles (Anaheim) bid for the 2006 Worldcon defeated Kansas City by 74 votes. • Sidewise

Awards for alternate history: Long Form was a tie, Martin J. Gidron's *The Severed Wing* and Harry Turtle-dove's *Ruled Britannia*. **Short Form**: William Sanders, "Empire." • Cruel item in the traditional spoof newsletter's Lost and Found column: "David Brin lost the Best Novel Hugo. Could whoever has it, please return it to him?" (His *Kiln People* placed second.) • The final Torcon attendance count was 3,725. • Gaylactic Spectrum Award winners included Laurie Marks for *Fire Logic* (novel) and Sarah Monette for "Three Letters from the Queen of Elfland" (short). • Prometheus Award for "libertarian" sf: Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch*. • At the closing ceremony, George R.R. Martin's ill-concealed longings were gratified at last. In the form of a glittering, inflatable Hugo rocket – liberated from a room party and fully seven feet long – George received *The Even Bigger One*.

ATTACKED BY A GIGANTIC BEAVER!

Margaret Atwood's careful rejection of the sf label was rewarded on 15 August, when *Oryx and Crake* made the Booker Prize longlist.

Ray Bradbury denied his sf career: "It's a lie. I was never a science-fiction writer. Science fiction is the art of telling things that can really happen because they exist physically... Fantasy is about things that can't happen, that you make happen anyway, which is what I do." Bradbury never a science-fiction writer? What, *never*? Hardly ever: "The only completely science-fiction story I've ever written was *Fahrenheit 451*." (*New York Daily News*)

Kelly Freas broke his hip in August. Lydia Marano writes: "Despite his age, the prognosis is very good and he's not expected to be incapacitated for long." But he couldn't be at Torcon as artist guest of honour, alas.

Terry Pratchett admits to being subliminal: "At no time do the words 'follow the yellow sick toad' appear in *The Wee Free Men*, but judging from my mail, many readers *read* the pun by a sort of mental transmission." (Discworld panel, Torcon)

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Astronomy Corner. "... it was often thought that Venus might be more promising as a potential colony. It is twenty miles closer to the Sun than we are, making it more outwardly attractive." (Sir Patrick Moore, *Eighty Not Out* [autobiography], 2003)

R.I.P. Charles Bronson (1921-2003), US actor who made rare genre appearances in *House of Wax* (1953), *Master of the World* (1961) and TV's *Twilight Zone* (1961), died on 30

August aged 81. • *Russ* (Louis Russell) *Chauvenet* (1920-2003), old-time US fan whose 1940s fanzines included *Detours* and *Sardonyx*, died peacefully on 24 June, aged 83. He will always be remembered – in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as well as sf fandom – for coining the word "fanzine" in October 1940. • *James Hale* (?1946-2003), UK editor and literary agent who notoriously "discovered" Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* on the Macmillan slushpile, died on 14 August aged 57. Iain always insisted on Hale as his freelance editor, even when they'd both left Macmillan. • *Mike Hinge* (1931-2003), New Zealand-born sf artist long resident in the USA, died on or near 9 August, his 72nd birthday. Ted White writes: "I ran more than half a dozen covers by Mike – all of which I loved – as well as interior art and running heads in *Amazing/Fantastic*. Mike also had two covers on *Time* magazine." • *William Woolfolk* (1917-2003), US novelist and TV writer who as Bill Woolfolk scripted many 1940s comics (including *Superman* and *Batman* for DC) and created the character Plastic Man, died on 20 July; he was 86. His favourite achievement: coining Captain Marvel's famous ejaculation, "Holey Moley!"

World Fantasy Award novel finalists: Jeffrey Ford, *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque*; Gregory Frost, *Fitcher's Brides*; Graham Joyce, *The Facts of Life*; Patricia A. McKillip, *Ombria in Shadow*; China Miéville, *The Scar*.

As Others See Us. John D. MacDonald, writing about his sf novels, was an early adopter of our favourite distancing technique: "They are both more accurately categorized as science fantasy than as science fiction, in that they are neither space-adventure, nor mad-scientist, nor doom-machine epics." (1968 afterword to *Ballroom of the Skies*)

Rhysling Awards for sf poetry: **SHORT** Ruth Berman, "Potherb Gardening" (*Asimov's* 12/02). **LONG** Charles Saplak and Mike Allen, "Epochs in Exile: A Fantasy Trilogy" (*Eotuzine*, 2/02).

Thog's Masterclass. *Striking Simile Dept.* "... the abbot watched dazedly as they rushed like lemons towards destruction." • *Literality Dept.* "Dr Runnicels, Immaculate's chief of staff, literally dripped Southern courtesy." • *Theology Dept.* "Catholics as a rule avoid divorce – unless one of them dies." • *Eyeballs in the Sky Dept.* "Anita's brown, penetrating eyes never left David's face, except to pour cups of tea." • *Aerostatics Dept.* "The vultures, aware of this supernatural transformation, halted in their flight." (all from Frank Corsaro, *Kunma*, 2003)

As broadcast television becomes more diffuse, so it becomes more difficult to attempt timely comment. With the proliferation of satellite and cable channels, and the staggered releases of shows on video and DVD, it has become impossible to even guess who is watching what and when – while North American readers will have long since seen the final episode of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, it was only shown earlier this year on Sky One. However, I daren't discuss the details here for fear of upsetting many readers in the UK who are still waiting for it to be broadcast on one of the so-called "terrestrial" channels ("so-called" because, ironically, "terrestrial" channels come into the house via an aerial on the roof, while satellite (i.e. non-terrestrial) channels come in via an underground cable), even though some may have bought the video release while still others will wait even longer for its release on DVD. In the midst of this drip feed of the final episode into the viewing audience it becomes necessary to couch the terms of commentary carefully in order not create spoilers for those who haven't seen it. So it is just as well that the detail doesn't matter, really. In a series where Joss Whedon was happy to kill off his leading character not once but twice, it was difficult not to speculate whether or not he might go for three, as in three strikes and you're out. However, as with everything else he does, Whedon rides the wave of speculation and still manages to deliver a conclusion to seven years of excellent television drama that is at once surprising and satisfying with a fresh new idea at its heart – although there is still a flavour of sequelitis, with new props introduced that show up in *Fray* (see below) and the promise (because no-one can keep their ears entirely closed to gossip) that several characters will re-emerge in other series. The cinematic software that generates vast army scenes, used in such a spectacular fashion in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, is less successful here, but perhaps that is a limitation of the small screen itself rather than the software. It is nevertheless a mark of just how much Whedon is willing to try to cram into a little over forty minutes of television drama.

Whedon demonstrates equally his ability to captivate an audience with the final episode of the fourth series of *Angel*. The narrative of this series – the conflict between Angel and his son – actually concludes in the previous episode, and this one could be seen more properly as a pilot for the fifth series, setting up a new and very different scenario which, while it grows organically from the previous stories,

WHEDON'S WANDERERS



MEDIA COMMENTARY WITH EVELYN LEWES

is sufficiently at odds with what has gone before as to be unbelievable to any diehard fan, were a simple description of it offered here.

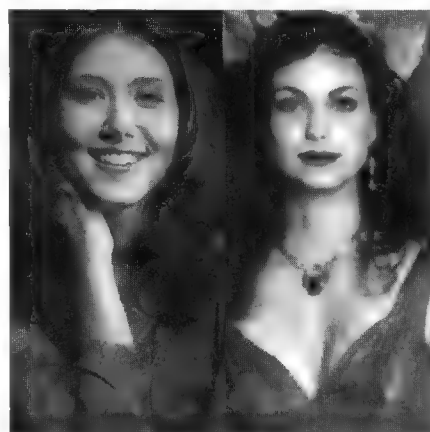
As part of his attempt to diversify his efforts, Whedon has also produced a short comic serial. Eight issues of *Fray* (Dark Horse comics, \$2.99 each) have appeared, and the most frustrating aspect of this otherwise ephemeral medium is that it took so long for the final three issues to appear. The first five came out approximately monthly at the end of 2001. Issue six then took four months to appear, #7 a whole year, and the final issue appeared five months later, in August this year, 2003. As has come to be expected from Whedon, the production values are superb, the writing is wonderful and the story is gripping. His entirely individual take on family life and values is given free reign so that the waifs and strays tend to fight firmly for family while those safe within a normal family are often rebellious and sulky. And if the whole eight comic story feels like little more than a story board for a single episode of a television show, then this is probably more a feature of the nature of comics than of Whedon's work.

The story features a future slayer, a girl called Fray, who, surprise, surprise, doesn't know she is a slayer. Thus, several comics simply relate how she comes to terms with her calling and her new watcher (although, as is usual with Whedon, there is an entirely unexpected wrinkle to this). The future city and her adventures in it bear a lot of resemblance to the art deco wonders of Superman's Metropolis, even down to the regular flying between skyscrapers, but this is

hardly surprising in the comic medium, where the colours and the lines have to be simple and clear in exactly the same way that characterizes art deco. Still and all, you can have good and bad art deco, and good and bad comics, and this is a superbly written and drawn comic that holds the interest right to the last page. If Fray's way of making a living – she steals valuable items to order – recalls Max in *Dark Angel*, and if the mutants resemble the demons in *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, and if the city she inhabits looks like Metropolis, while this might simply indicate the age of the reviewer, it is certainly a tribute to Whedon's narrative ability. It is probably impossible to ponder the future and come up with something entirely new. That it resembles other precursors but doesn't depend on them is probably, more than anything else, a mark of how good Whedon is.

To ram the point home, after a summer of wondering what we would do without *Buffy* on television, the Sci-Fi Channel bravely undertook to show the few episodes of *Firefly* that Whedon was allowed to make, and, good news/bad news, this is the best science-fiction drama series ever to grace our television sets/the American television channel have already cancelled it with only 15 episodes made. In this one case, it would appear that Whedon was his own worst enemy. By promoting it as a cross between science fiction and western fiction, he raised the wrong sort of expectations, so it would appear that no-one wanted it to succeed – which is a shame, because it is actually superb.

Star Trek set the benchmark of a small group of intrepid wanderers boldly going, and this was quickly followed by *Blake's Seven* in the UK. But where *Star Trek* appeared to have a crew of thousands as a back-up, *Blake's Seven* frugally kept the intrepid group as almost the entire cast. The ensuing *Star Trek* spin-offs, and other offerings such as *Babylon Five*, continued the small-group-inside-a-larger-group setting, but come the 1990s the fiscal sharks were biting, and shows such as *Farscape* and *Andromeda* began to appear that somehow contrived to make it possible to run an entire spaceship with a manageable all-star cast and no extras. Whedon has taken this idea, wrapped it back to its beginning (remember Rodenberry sold *Star Trek* originally as "Wagon Train in space"), stolen unashamedly every science-fiction visual trope you have ever loved from the past thirty years, sprinkled in the Whedon magic dust, and come up with the best television science-fiction show ever.



Above: Jewel Staite (left) is Kaylee Frye and Morena Baccarin is Inara Serra in *Firefly*

If there is one thing that characterizes *Firefly* that sets it apart from its more successful contemporaries, it is heart. *Firefly* has people not only that you care about, but that you *want* to care about, quirky and secretive though they may be – so much so that after 15 episodes, their presence is sorely missed in this household, and the DVD release (7 Dec) eagerly awaited, even if it is only being released in the USA in NTSC format.

The show opens with a scene-setting voice-over that tells us that "Earth got used up" so humanity went off and colonized another galaxy with lots of new Earths. There ensued the usual war where the centre, here called "The Alliance," wanted complete control, but found it too hard to control the periphery, so there is a lawless zone where it nevertheless still tries to flex its muscles. Malcolm Reynolds (played by Nathan Fillion) was a sergeant in the army that resisted the alliance, and in the pilot episode we see him, ably assisted by Zoe (played by Gina Torres), taking command when their captain goes into shell shock. After a

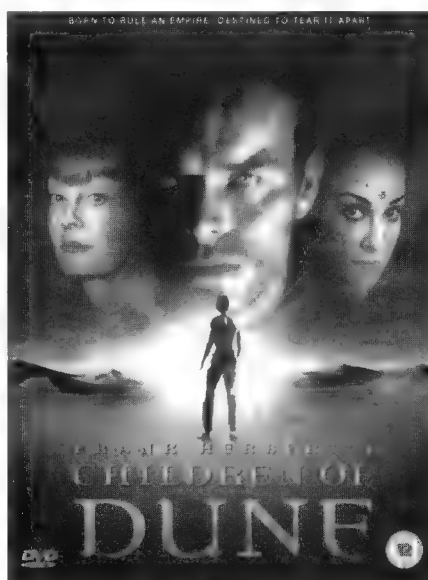
Below: Adam Baldwin (no relation to the film-star Baldwin brothers) (left) is Jayne and Nathan Fillion (right) is Mal in *Firefly*



hiatus we see him now captain of a Firefly class freighter spaceship, still with Zoe as his second in command, but now with a mechanic and a pilot. The story proper begins when in the course of a job they acquire the rest of their complement.

As is usual with Whedon, he is never content simply with using the characters he has assembled to tell a story, so each episode performs the double function of telling a rather good quirky science-fictional tale and filling in some of the gaps in the characters' backgrounds. As there are by now nine of them, and they are all fantastically complex, there is a lot of potential here. It is plain from the episodes that were made that Whedon was just hitting his stride with this series, and it must have come as a terrible shock to him to have it pulled so quickly. These episodes are certainly much better than the equivalent early episodes of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, but perhaps their budget was higher and thus much more vulnerable to sudden death. The good news is that, in a nice reversal of his historic precedent, Whedon is producing a movie based on *Firefly*, where his *Buffy* project began originally as a movie and became a TV series later. So the characters he worked so hard to create will live on – let's hope that the same actors are available – and if it is as successful as the very vocal fan base would like it to be, then we can look forward to Whedon once again forwarding one of his projects by other means. In a previous column, *Roddenberry's Children*, the slide away from Gene Roddenberry's vision was bemoaned. It would appear, in that Whedon cares for his characters and his audience in a way that Paramount and the new *Enterprise* team have abandoned, that he is the true spiritual descendant of Gene Roddenberry. He should wear the mantle with pride.

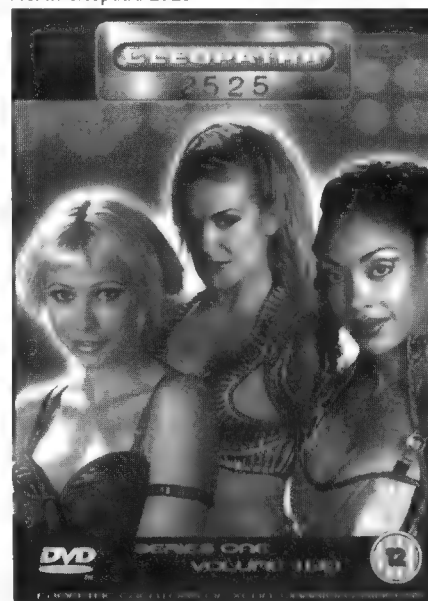
Sequels using other hands are a sore spot at the moment. When the Sci-Fi channel finally produced their long-awaited sequel to *Dune*, instead of blazoning it all over their channel and fanfaring it everywhere, in the UK they sold it to The Hallmark Channel, thus guaranteeing it a minuscule audience of people who didn't know about the first episode and were highly unlikely to care. And if Hallmark thought they were on a winner to increase their audience, then they would have been disappointed, as, while the sequel is very good, it lacks the awesomely lavish voluptuousness of the original series. It seems likely that this is because where in the first series the writer was also the director, in the second, while the same writer was used, a new director was brought



in at a late stage. If the producers were trying to trim the budget, they undoubtedly succeeded; but they also trimmed their own success, and that seems like a pyrrhic victory to me.

Susan Sarandon is the new big name introduced here, and she rather overbalances the drama, as her part does not carry the weight that her name does. It was disappointing not to see Saskia Reeves again as Paul Atreides mother, where, as mentioned above in relation to *Firefly*, continuity of actor is all important in establishing continuity in narrative. Once again, Frank Herbert's story is rendered well onto the small screen, but in spending too much time on special effects that were barely even mentioned in the book, such as capturing a spice worm, the story looks even further out of balance. On its own, this is

Below: Jennifer Sky (left) is Cleopatra, Victoria Pratt (centre) is Sarge, and Gina Torres (right) is Hel in *Cleopatra 2525*



still an enthralling television drama – but it would never have been made on its own. As a sequel, it suffers rather in comparison to its precursor, and as such, by the law of diminishing returns, it seems unlikely that we will see any more in this series, and if we do they will probably be so underfunded as to be not worth watching.

Finally, while trying to find news of the forthcoming release of *Firefly* in the catalogue of one of the on-line video stores, Gina Torres's name popped up again (she plays Zoe in *Firefly*), as star of another science-fiction television programme called *Cleopatra 2525*. On two DVDs there are some fourteen episodes, and as they were only a fiver each, they seemed to be worth buying on spec. To be honest, they look like a cheap sci-fi knock-off attempt to cash in on the mainstream re-success of *Charlies Angels*, and it should have been warning enough that the theme tune is a revamped version of the schlocky one-hit wonder by Zager and Evans of deserved obscurity. But, truth to tell, the story-telling is so gloriously barmy that the show ends up keeping us watching purely for what outrage they will perpetrate next.

"Cleopatra" is the stage name of an exotic dancer (Jennifer Sky) who has spent some of her earnings on a boob-job, the better to perform in her chosen trade. She wakes up five hundred years later, having been frozen for possible resuscitation (if they explained why, I missed it). In the meantime, Earth has been invaded by mechanoids, and humanity has retreated beneath the surface. She encounters two women, Hel (Gina Torres) and Sarge (Victoria Pratt) who are committed to fighting the mechanoids and are guided and governed by a mysterious "voice". It cannot come as a surprise that they are a blonde, a brunette and a redhead. Cleo is taken along on adventures very much against their will by these two feminine warriors, but has a lot of fun along the way reintroducing 21st century ideas – in one memorable scene she teaches a stripper how to do the job properly as a distraction during a high-rolling gambling game in a club. She is the archetypal rag-doll that I have mentioned before, but without doubts has her own strengths, finding (often inappropriate) soundbytes from her own time to make her points. Don't even think about the science – it is twaddle. Enjoy the romp. It comes from the makers of *Xena*, so I shouldn't have been surprised that it was at least fun. Go on. Spend a tenner and give someone a pleasant surprise for Christmas.



REVIEWED

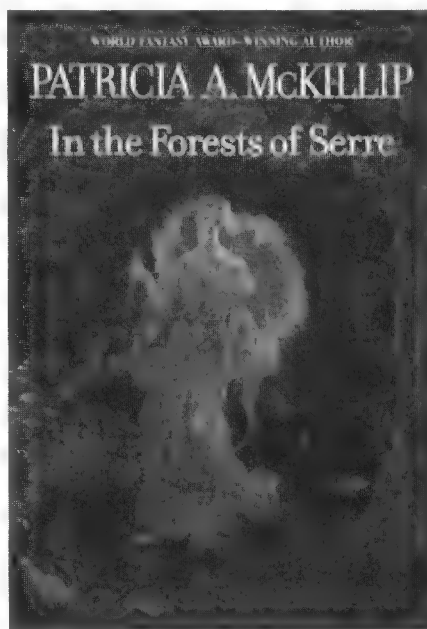
Since the publication of *The Book of Atrix Wolfe* in 1995, Patricia McKillip has been quietly amassing an impressive list of novels, using Faerie and traditional folklore as her premise. Recognized early in her career for work categorized as young-adult fiction – *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld* (the first recipient of the World Fantasy Award) and the “Riddle-Master” trilogy – but since turning entirely to adult fantasy, her writing has been overlooked by many of the more serious critics of the genre; this despite the fact that her novels invariably appear each year on most of the “best” lists. Perhaps the relative lack of attention is due to her earlier associations with young-adult fantasy or her returning use of Faerie as a context for her work. After 30 years of writing it may be possible she’s come to be taken for granted, that a certain level of quality is presumed, or that her work is passed over in favour of a newer generation of authors whose concerns are more in tune with current critics’ tastes. Or perhaps it is a reaction to the overt romanticism of the cover art by Kinuko Y. Craft: little question that many of today’s more serious critics tend to eschew the romantic elements found in fiction, or that they exist as a frame for McKillip’s work. But to dismiss her stories as mere idyllic retreads of traditional folklore or sentimental musings lauded in the *Romantic Times* is to neglect the far more serious side of her novels – not to mention a skill of composition, prose and use of symbolism and allegory that sets her stories well apart, and readily identifies her as one of the finest authors writing fantasy today.

In the Forests of Serre (Ace, \$22.95) revisits many of McKillip’s recurring themes: the internal quest

One of Our Finest

William Thompson

and struggle for self-knowledge revealed through external metaphor and allegory; a central story around which others revolve, many in the form of riddles, some which evolve from traditional folklore, most prominently the Russian tales of Baba Yaga and the Firebird. Certain motifs repeat themselves – eyes that are both mirrors and doors, occasionally blind, sometimes missing or seen as a third eye; birds that initiate as well as transport the story; occurrences in threes – all standard archetypes, but refashioned into forms as illusory yet unchanging as the landscape of dream and fairy tale that McKillip appropriates, significantly centred within a magical forest that is “timeless... a place that would never change and never end,” yet “peculiar... unpredictable and not always safe.”



McKillip has often turned to shape-shifting in her novels, and it reappears here, in the characters of the crone, the firebird, or the wizard Gyre, and identities are always in question, subject to metamorphosis, as indeed is the story. Dichotomies are juxtaposed, between appearances, wizards and magic, Ronan and Not-Ronan, or the story as written by the scribe, Euan Ash, and its experience first-hand. And, as in previous novels, the author explores the nature of words and their influence upon perception, as well as how stories are a means of “speaking a landscape” – internal and external – “to life.”

Despite their guise as fairy tale, and their lyrical prose and dreamlike atmosphere recapturing childhood wonder, the author’s stories invariably represent complex, convoluted investigations into desire and the deceptions and realities conjured by the human heart. While love can be an expression of this desire, power just as often is the drive behind our dreams, with identity and perception, though accounted and defined by the reasoned evidence of the mind, often ruled by more primitive magic, “the oldest language of the heart.” McKillip continues to explore this dual theme in her latest outing, and the conflict it represents becomes a struggle for self-knowledge. And though much of this can be grasped only within the context of her ever-changing use of metaphor and allegory – at times appearing to confound the story’s external logic – this novel, in its reliance upon more conventional narrative elements, is probably her most accessible since *Winter Rose*.

The novel opens with a prince returning from war who accidentally tramples a witch’s favourite hen. He is unwilling to offer the compensation she demands, and the witch predicts he “will have a very bad day.” Already grieving for the loss of his wife and child, and having gone to war seeking his own death, it is difficult for Prince Ronan to imagine his life becoming worse. But he returns home to discover that his power-mad father has arranged an unwanted marriage during his absence, and immediately thereafter he falls under the spell of a beautiful flaming bird that leads him deep into the forest. His struggle to find his way home, as well as free himself from the curse behind his ensorcellment, provides the premise for several intertwined stories of enchantment and discovery, all told with the author’s inimitable ability to recapture folklore’s original sense of wonder and deeper mystery.

After 15 novels set within Faerie, I suspect the criticism that can most readily be made of McKillip is that she has allowed herself to become typecast, that in her repeated return to folklore as a background for her stories, and

the failure to push her archetypal boundaries or adopt new approaches, she has become her own convention. But I can think of any number of critically successful authors in the genres – indeed, I might say the majority – for which much the same can be said. This has not prevented the wider and continued recognition they deserve, or caused them to be shunted aside as sub-generic or anachronistic anomalies. Perhaps it is within the broader or more contemporary context of fantastic fiction that McKillip has enlivened herself, writing a closed set. But I would suggest that it is the individuality of her writing that in some respects has contributed to her solitude, along with an aesthetic in which past and present traditions coexist and romanticism is no less real than “the wordless, wild language of the heart.”

Tad Williams is one of America's better and more versatile writers, notable for his extravagant and varied world-building, whether in conventional fantasy, as in *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*, the whimsical young adult fiction of *Tailchaser's Song*, or the recent virtual complexities of *Otherland*. In each of these outings Williams has shown himself a master storyteller, comfortable with a variety of conventions or settings, equally adept at whichever genre, and often on an grand scale. *The War of the Flowers* (DAW, \$24.95; Orbit, £17.99) is no exception, showcasing his talents in a fictional realm that until now has been dominated by the likes of Charles de Lint.

The main character of this latest novel – in certain respects akin to Simon in *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn* – is not the usual hero notable for strengths waiting to be awakened, but a loser, both in his own eyes as well as the world. Theo is a singer who once possessed a bright future; a voice that early reviewers predicted would lead him to Broadway or the commercial success of “Bono and U2.” But now, at age 30, he finds himself fronting for a Bay Area band in which he feels on the wrong side of the generation gap, unable to relate to his fellow bandmembers, living a life that straddles his youth and the middle-aged banalities of work and family. As he muses to himself: “Everybody starts out as somebody. Then it slips away.”

His self-doubt and pity are soon given focus. When his pregnant girlfriend miscarries, it is not just the baby that dies. Theo's lover reveals it was only the hope for a child that kept them together. In a moment of brutal clarity, she confesses her disappointment: Theo's charm and her feelings for him are no longer enough to compensate for the adolescent dreams of musical success, his lack of ambition or a part-time job delivering flowers (foreshadowing).

Theo has simply not matured into the man she wishes to make a life with. And, in one of the sadder and more poignant passages of the book, Theo is left to wonder about the child that will never be, reminded of a story from childhood whose narrator was “nobody.”

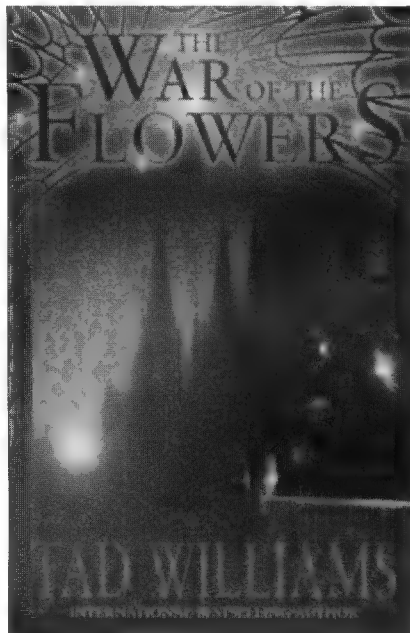
Theo's sense of failure and alienation is further reinforced by the imminent death of his mother, who admits she never loved him as she should. Confronted by grief at his recent losses, for his own self-worth and identity as well as the few to whom he once believed he could turn for support, “It sometimes seemed to Theo that he was letting go too, cutting all ties, following his mother on his own journey into the void.” But his tragedies are about to draw him into a mirror realm, in which all that has happened will be unmasked as an extension of another world, one that Theo thought only the fancy of childhood.

Theo's crossing over into Faerie, however, will not entirely match expectations. Williams's reinvention of the denizens of the air both borrows richly from tradition and reshapes it. While a compendium of elfin lore, *The War of Flowers* shifts the sprites and bogles of bedtime into a bizarre and industrialized urban locale at once wondrous and all too familiar, allowing the author to construct a tale that returns the reader to childhood while at the same time addressing more contemporary and adult themes. The landscape and creatures that populate the narrative are right out of Andrew Lang and conventional folklore, yet are transformed into a society and culture that, despite their magical character, imitates our own. Magic and science, though distinct, are often similar in the results they produce, just as beauty and grotesquerie, fantasy and reality, coexist within the novel. And the elfin society that has

evolved since Spenser's day has kept a perverted pace with our own.

Since Tatiana and Oberon's disappearance during the Gigantine Wars, the power that once sustained “the Fields Beyond” has been converted into industrial output. Now magic, or the “true science,” is generated by draining magic from members of the lower classes, supported by a living lottery whose motto is: “So few giving so much for so many.” In the absence of monarchy, power has fallen under the sway of the seven wealthiest families, each named for a flower, who struggle for preeminence amongst themselves while ruling as an oligarchy over the rest. Oddly enough, the Flowers appear the most human of Faerie's denizens; wings have become a symbol of racial impurity and the more inhuman members of society – the pookas, sprites and ogres – have been marginalized as farmers, labourers and servants, or, in the case of woodwights and loireags, restricted to the remote countryside. Homeless goblins roam the streets or wander the wastelands as grims. The great forests of True Arden and Silverwood have been logged, or left as recreational parkland on the Flowers' country estates.

The parallels to our own world are obvious, and obtain particular focus in The City, which has come to symbolize not only modern Faerie, but the seat of power for the Flowers. Theo is drawn into a conspiracy set in motion shortly after his birth, between factions that wish to live, as they always have, side-by-side with the mortal world, and those that see humanity and contemporary science as a threat. The two worlds exist as strange mirror-images of themselves, with events in one having an impact, however residual, on the other. This sets the stage for Williams to explore and parody a wide range of contemporary social issues (though I would not, like some reviewers, draw too close a comparison with the collapse of the World Trade Center), from class inequality to racism, economic exploitation and environmental degradation, to aesthetic insights into music and fiction, especially as the latter relates to fantasy's role in literature. At times these investigations are apparent, as already suggested, but others, such as the relationship between science and magic, or the function of the fantastic within literature, are more oblique and subtle. And though this novel is characterized primarily by Faerie, and therefore fantasy, elements of horror and science fiction intrude, if not conspicuously. Without claiming too close an association, this novel shares far more in spirit with the writings of China Miéville, or Ian R. MacLeod's *The Light Ages*, than it does with the tale by Patricia McKillip.



Despite its darker moments or more serious themes, it is told with a great amount of humour, often expressed through its delightful cast. Theo's bickering relationship with Applecore provides running comic relief, and characterization remains one of this novel's strong suits, whether for comedic purposes, villainy or the tragedy and quiet heroism that eventually overtakes the character of Button. Even the momentary tend to be memorable, and the same imaginative facility to create unique and eccentric characters is revealed equally in Williams's rich and faceted descriptions, visualizing a realm brought vividly to life.

Interestingly enough, it is Williams's fecund imagination that in part undermines the impact of the novel. The story's pace lags in places, and there is a sense of padding, of pages that could have been discarded to the overall betterment of the book. The author returns too often to reiterate Theo's lack of understanding of the world he finds himself in, and there is little question that certain details are superfluous or impede dramatic development. One of the more tense and dynamic scenes occurs with the destruction of the Daffodil compound, in which Theo is buried beneath a burning building. His struggle to escape as well as find and rescue Applecore is vividly described, yet at the same time delayed in details – his long efforts to climb a stairwell, his wandering down hallways in search of Applecore – that seem described so fully as to vitiate the episode's anticipated vitality. Though differing in their context, other scenes and depiction seem similarly accretive or incidental.

Perhaps I'm being uncharitable, but it seems to me this novel could have benefited from a greater economy of approach, resulting in a more tightly focused narrative. Granted, some of Williams's strengths are his rich imagination and colourful description, but at times he indulges in an embarrassment of wealth, and I suspect a jettisoning of a hundred pages or so would have trimmed away the fat, leaving a much leaner and more evocative novel. On balance, it offers more than it withholds; but over time I found myself wearying from a surfeit of words.

Newer fantasy writer Carol Berg received some favourable attention for her trilogy, *Transformation*, *Revelation* and *Restoration*. At the time those books were published, my attention was focused elsewhere (the usual – too many books and not enough time) and to date they continue to sit on my shelves, unread. However, based on this earlier praise, and because I could fit it in, I looked forward to reading Ms Berg's latest effort, *Song of the Beast* (Roc, \$6.99), expecting it to display the

imaginative writing skills lauded in her earlier work.

The initial premise is both intriguing and rich with potential: a harpist and singer released after 17 years of imprisonment, the reasons behind his incarceration unknown and initially unrevealed. A cousin of the king and "the most famous musician in fifty generations," "beloved of gods and men," Aidan MacAllister's sudden arrest and captivity is a mystery, as is his unexpected release from prison. Routinely tortured for ten years, then forgotten for seven, during which he had no contact either with the outside world or men, he is freed almost without the ability for speech, his back broken and scarred from the whip, his hands permanently crippled and deformed. The voice that once moved audiences to tears and was even claimed by a god for its own has grown mute, never to be heard in song again. Aidan is but an empty shell, the spirit of music that once inspired him grown silent, a castaway of cruelty that seems without motive.

Left with only his own bitterness, destitute and friendless, Aidan's immediate future appears grim, death merely a logical outcome of a spirit already deceased. But his hatred of those who tortured him lead him to attack one of the Ridemark in defence of a prostitute. While this action causes him to become hunted, it also brings him into contact with the Elhim, an earlier and seemingly inconsequential race who were the first inhabitants of Elyria, long before the arrival of the Senai and their legions of Dragon Riders. The Elhim greet Aidan as Dragon Speaker, helping to hide his identity from those who seek him, as well as enlisting his aid in righting an ancient wrong that may

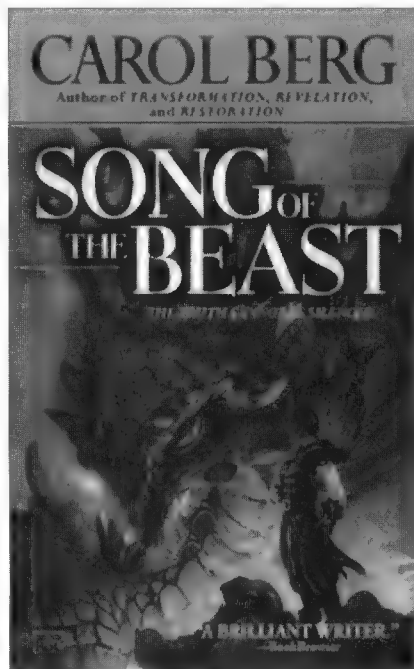
eventually answer the mystery behind Aidan's imprisonment, as well as the source of his original talent.

The narrative world Berg has created is inventive while drawing upon the conventions of fantasy, imbuing it with enough original ideas and premises to set it apart from the usual adventure. Her main characters tend to be well-developed and multidimensional, and the basic concept behind the novel offers a new spin on the usual incorporation of dragons or adoption of music as a theme. Magic is similarly re-imagined and the author's skills as a storyteller at times are amply displayed, particularly in the opening chapters.

But the focus of this novel begins to wander shortly thereafter, most noticeably during the time spent in Carmathan, and from that point onward the story never regains its earlier taut development, seeming instead to drift from one revelation or event to another, interludes spaced between significantly intruding on the narrative's pace and lessening its dramatic impact. An episodic quality develops that fails to absorb the reader, further compounded by a periodic tendency to backfill the storyline in order to explain certain incidents as they occur. Additionally the use of structurally inept alterations in character perspective takes place at several junctures, accompanied elsewhere by the insertion of a solitary journal entry and a dragon's soliloquy – the changes in perspective separated into individual sections – that seem, at least in certain instances, awkward, especially when the bulk of the narrative is being told through the first person of Aidan. This becomes most obvious during the inclusion of Donal's experiences, issuing as they do from a character whose role until that moment has been tertiary at best. A similar discontinuity occurs during the short section devoted to Narim, though there it is largely due to the interruptive nature of its following 142 pages of Aidan's account. Finally, the king's explanation that he never inquired as to what had happened to his cousin stretches the limits of credulity.

Based on the author's reputation, I am going to assume this novel represents a misstep, and is not an accurate reflection of her overall skills as a writer. Possibilities are glimpsed, and at times Ms Berg's talents are evident. However, whatever potential this story may have had remains stillborn, largely due to poor decisions concerning its composition, and a failure to sharply focus the story's development. Room is left at the end for a continuance, though I would suggest this tale remain a singleton: difficult to envision a satisfying comeback after such an uneven start.

William Thompson



Amateurism – in the sense of the skilled but unpaid professional – was there at the start of research into space travel with Dr Robert Goddard's first liquid-fuelled rocketry in the 1920s and, in the UK, in the studies of our own British Interplanetary Society. This expectation that the lone individual, or small group of enthusiasts, could construct a spaceship and venture beyond the Earth's atmosphere was evident in such stories as Robert Heinlein's *Rocket Ship Galileo* (1947). Reality killed that idea stone dead. Once it was shown that it took the massive resources of the USA, billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of man-hours to build, launch and fly Apollo to the Moon, then to write a story about our plucky space-hopefuls blasting off on their own accord seemed ridiculous.

Red Thunder by John Varley (Ace, \$23.95) takes up this old notion and gives it new life. Varley's latest novel is set a little way into our future and follows the efforts of two friends, Manny and Dak, who, with help from their girlfriends, aim to build a spaceship. Their project begins when they encounter an ex-astronaut, ace pilot Colonel Travis Broussard, who's been drummed out of NASA. Set against the background of a new space race (this time to Mars), the competition is now between China and the USA. We discover that Broussard's genius cousin, Jubal Broussard, warns that the American spaceship has flawed engines: it's likely to blow up *en route* to Mars. Thus their project becomes a rescue mission, as well as an attempt to reach Mars before the Chinese do.

Alert readers will recognize the name Jubal and link it to another well-known sf character: Heinlein's Jubal Harshaw from his Mars-man-on-Earth novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). It's no coincidence that this name crops up: Varley acknowledges Heinlein at the beginning of his new novel: "To... Robert A. Heinlein for the inspiration..." So *Red Thunder* appears to be Varley's take on a Heinlein novel. The odd in-joke appears throughout the book: I noticed a line of dialogue: "we... also walk dogs" (the title of a 1941 Heinlein short story). The characters spend a fair amount of time eating and chatting whilst gathered around a swimming pool – yet another Heinlein motif from *Stranger*...

But even in this near future of automated highway driving and Mars Missions, there's no way that any group of enthusiasts could build their own spaceship. Varley cleverly brings in a literary device similar to one used in Heinlein's novel *Sixth Column* (1949): a totally new science. Jubal Broussard discovers this, and it's enough to provide 1-G propulsion to Mars and back. That's Mars in three-and-a-bit days –

DIY in the Sky

Nigel Brown

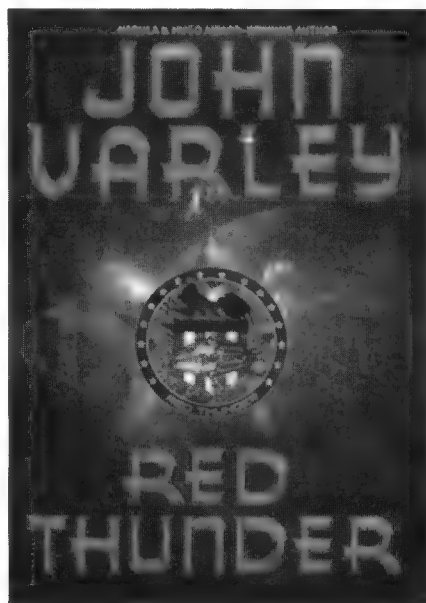
the same kind of time-scale as the Apollo flights to the Moon. This leaves our heroes to concentrate on building the body and working systems of the spaceship itself, named *Red Thunder*. In this way, the novel resembles James Blish's juvenile *Welcome to Mars* (1967), where an antigravity device actually propels the spaceship, but it's the details of "spaceproofing" an old packing crate that make the story interesting. Part of the pleasure of reading Heinlein is his attention to technological detail: Varley does his best to emulate this. It's not a bad try, but I'd give Varley more points for the smattering of humour he scatters throughout his tale. Although the characters are somewhat two-dimensional, there's the occasional incident that shines. I was grateful I wasn't reading this book in public for my dignity's sake: I found myself laughing out loud every now and then.

Another strength in *Red Thunder* is Varley's treatment of the theme of the

expert amateur that runs throughout this work. His exploration of it, and its consequences for the individuals involved, makes for a memorable read. But one thing that jarred was Varley's treatment of racism. Heinlein was a writer of his time, for which we might forgive the uncomfortable elements in *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) or the stereotypical evil Pan-Asian enemies in *Sixth Column*; but I was shocked to come across Varley's description – emanating from a self-described apolitical character in the book – of Irish rebels, Palestinians and Zionists as a "paranoid malcontents." This blanket condemnation of such different groups of people, without any justification, left a bad taste in the mouth. Although Varley was trying to express the dangers of the powerful new technology of *Red Thunder* falling into the wrong hands, he tackles this issue with some clumsiness and even seems to admit – through his character Jubal – that his solution can't last forever. Perhaps he was trying to echo the philosophy of Heinlein's short story "Solution Unsatisfactory" (1941). But there's another point of view that he fails to express: that if this new technology is so powerful that we might all be blown up by it, at least it's allowed the human race to leave Earth and not have, as a species, all our eggs in one basket.

By about two thirds of the way through, I began to get nervous: it didn't look as though things were moving fast enough, the narrative pace was too slow to allow all of *Red Thunder*'s promises to be kept. Were we heading for a sequel, I worried, when they finally launch their spaceship? (I've never quite forgiven Hergé for doing that with Tintin's *Destination Moon* [1959] – a terrific comic book that only climaxed with the launch of Tintin's moon rocket). Without giving anything away, however, I can reassure readers that *Red Thunder* is a stand-alone novel, although having finished it, part of me wishes that there were more to look forward to. No matter. This isn't the vintage Varley of *Titan* (1979), or of his early short stories, but a fun read, nonetheless.

At first perusal *The Earthborn* by Paul Collins (Tor, \$23.95) also appears to inhabit Heinlein territory. Collins is an Australian writer (this is his first novel to be published in the USA); it is a teenager's adventure set in a future Melbourne, Australia. In the tradition of a Heinlein juvenile, it begins with 14-year-old Welkin Quinn as he makes his way to his post on the bridge of the starship *Colony*. The starship is approaching Earth after an aborted attempt to colonize the Tau Ceti system. By the end of the first



chapter it's heading for a deliberate crash-landing on top of Melbourne. To add to Quinn's troubles, Earth has suffered nuclear war and nuclear winter – the sparse, ragged and gang-riven population is only just recovering; the last thing they need is a giant starship landing on their heads, especially as the *Colony's* ruling elite are intent on conquering Earth and exterminating the Earth-born population.

The Earthborn relates Quinn's experiences on Earth, starting with his meeting with Sarah. She's the leader of a gang of teenagers, and has a vision of uniting the other Earth-born (Quinn, born in space, is a "Sky-born") and re-establishing the rule of law on Earth. Where the novel veers away from being in the mould of the Heinlein juveniles is the manner in which it proceeds. We get to watch Quinn growing up in this harsh new environment, but there's little of the minutiae allowing us empathize with him and, at the other end of the narrative telescope, there's little global sense of what's happening elsewhere in this world. The story is, essentially, an action-packed shoot-'em-up, probably written for the juvenile market – if that's what teenagers want to read nowadays. I suspect sf-reading teenagers want something a bit more thought-provoking: certainly Heinlein managed to provide that, along with the drama. The reason why I wonder if this book has been written solely for teenagers is the high-density of exclamation marks scattered throughout. I found it irritating! You shouldn't have to put them in to make things exciting! (One of Elmore Leonard's famous Ten Rules of Writing stated that there should only be two or three exclamation marks every hundred thousand words of prose. Maybe that's going too far, but you get the idea.)

I'd be more forgiving of this novel if not for its ending. If you want simple action-packed adventure, then *The Earthborn* might be to your taste, but be warned: unlike *Red Thunder*, the story of *The Earthborn* continues past the end of this book. Collins has run out of pages to tell his tale, and there's no indication when the rest of Quinn's adventures will appear.

If proof be needed that the worse-off a character, the more gripping the story, then *The Phoenix Exultant* by John C. Wright (Tor, \$24.95) provides it. This is the second part of his trilogy "The Golden Age," subtitled "A Romance of the Far Future" and set about 10,000 years in the future. The solar system has been colonized, and humans live in a complex civilization that takes full advantage of the possibilities of virtual reality, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence. In

the first book, *The Golden Age* (2002; reviewed in *Interzone* 183), we followed the fortunes of Phaethon, a man with the ambition to travel among the stars. Phaethon has been the driving force behind the construction of a kilometres-long starship named *The Phoenix*. He spent most of the first volume trying to rediscover his past, as his memory had been wiped. By the end, his memory was restored, but – as a penalty for this – he was sent into internal exile within his society and he lost *The Phoenix* to his creditors. All he has left is his powerful armoured space suit, with its small supply of nanomachinery.

The Phoenix Exultant starts immediately after the end of book one. Phaethon has to re-gain control of his starship whilst getting no help from those around him. Unlike in *The Golden Age*, where the level of threat to Phaethon himself was concealed and obscured by the kaleidoscopic background of shifting virtual realities, Phaethon is in desperate straits from the beginning of this new book. His struggles make for a gripping tale with a level of suspense that was entirely missing from first novel. The stakes are high, and consequently, this sequel is much more of a page-turner.

To complicate matters, Phaethon is (supposedly) being stalked by a powerful hidden enemy whom he thinks is the corrupted remnant of a previously failed expedition to the stars. His vision of the destruction of this colony is memorable and disturbing – Wright isn't afraid of lecturing the reader, but gets away with it with his techno-imagery and vivid descriptions of the destruction of a civilization so advanced that it can draw near-infinite power from the boundary of a black hole.

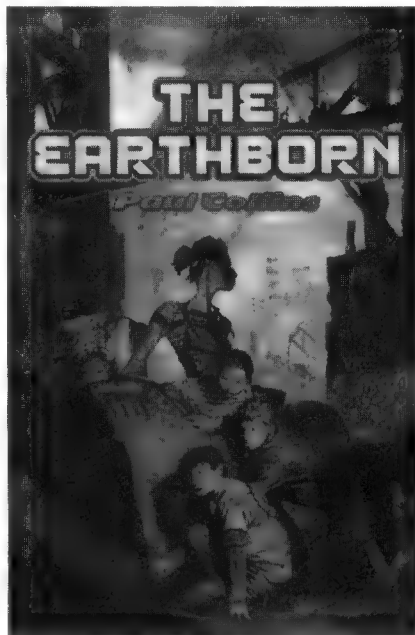
Along the way, Phaethon encounters a group of fellow outcasts. Wright's

depiction of these outcasts (with such wonderful names as Vulpine First Iron-joy and Drusillet Zero Self-Soul), and of their society (hammered out of nothing) punches you in the guts: *Waterworld* meets *Mad Max*. The manner in which Phaethon relies on his super-suit brings Marvel Comics' *Iron Man* to mind, but Phaethon is no Tony Stark, Iron Man's alter ego: he relies less on his mechanisms and more on his wits to survive. We suffer along with him, we glory in his little victories. It's fun to cheer him on.

And I was delighted to see the return of a character from the first book – Marshal Atkins. He's a super-soldier, charged with the defence of this peaceful, idyllic society. This cynical immortal soldier is a useful anchor within the story; his valuable perspective on what's happening to Phaethon, outside this rigid hierarchical world, gives a much needed 21st-century point-of-view. In a story set so far into the future it's too easy otherwise for the reader to get lost in all the strangeness. My main complaint with the first book was the complex diction Wright chose to employ. That novel is bogged down a bit by its many references to back-history, and the way in which the names employed by the various characters are descriptive references to their level of sentience, or the position in their society's hierarchy. It took some dogged reading to get to the point where I knew what was going on – and I suspect the casual reader would have given up long before. I stuck with it, however, and was rewarded with a slow-paced, although thought-provoking tale. *The Phoenix Exultant* is, ironically, a much easier entry into this trilogy. Wright takes pains in the first chapter to explain what's going on – thankfully ignoring that much misunderstood rule *show, don't tell*. We're grateful for these goblets of information: this time, we're well prepared for what's to come.

Another advantage this book has – paradoxically – is that it's no longer the promised conclusion to the saga. Before *The Phoenix Exultant* appeared, Wright had stated that the series would be a two-parter: it has either "grown in the telling" or the publishers have decided to split it into two more books. This means that the present novel doesn't need to carry the responsibility of a satisfying conclusion to the whole story. Wright does wrap up his middle book in an acceptable manner, but we're not really any closer to the central mystery of Phaethon's quest. We have to give the author the benefit of the doubt until the next book. No matter. Wright has earned his extra wordage with me: I'm looking forward to the third volume, *The Golden Transcendence*, when, I hope, the silicon chips will finally be on the table.

Nigel Brown



Bram Stoker's version of the vampire legend in *Dracula* is so plainly a paean to the repressed sexuality of the Victorian age that it always surprises me when people find other metaphorical meanings for the myth of the bloodsucker. But the feminist reinterpretations by Jody Scott and Suzy McKee Charnas showed that the myth could be used to serve other purposes; and Joss Whedon's recent extraordinary televisual success with *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, using the vampire myth to underpin stories of adolescent angst and rites of passage, with its segue into *Angel* as a kind of supernatural private-eye series, has proved that there is plenty of life in the undead yet.

So it only came as a mild surprise to realize that Steve Cash's *The Meq* (Macmillan, £10.99) is also a vampire story, albeit lacking the central detail of any kind of blood-sucking.

Described as "a lyric fantasy" by its publisher, it is plainly a well-written work that, because it is not aimed specifically at any one genre, falls rather awkwardly between several. It is gradually revealed that the Meq are aliens who fell to Earth some time in human ancient history and survive in a symbiotic relationship with the human beings that surround them while they attempt to recover their lost heritage and perhaps one day return to their own world. They are aided in this by resembling 12-year-old human children and being functionally immortal until the point that they pair-bond to reproduce, at which point they begin to age like apparently normal human beings.

This is of course where the analogy with vampires comes in. As 12-year-olds, they can do no productive work, so become permanent drains on

Wampyr variations and the English resurgence

Paul Brazier

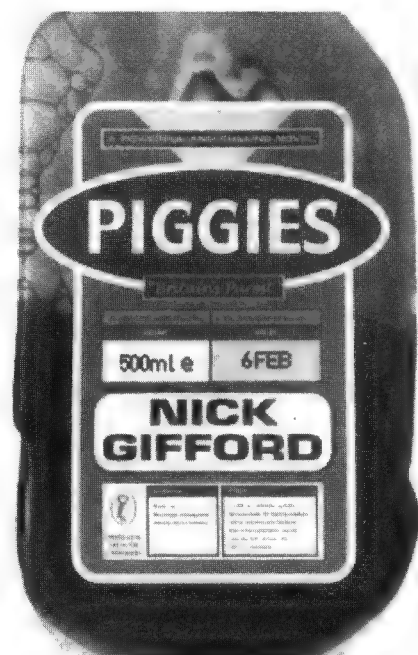
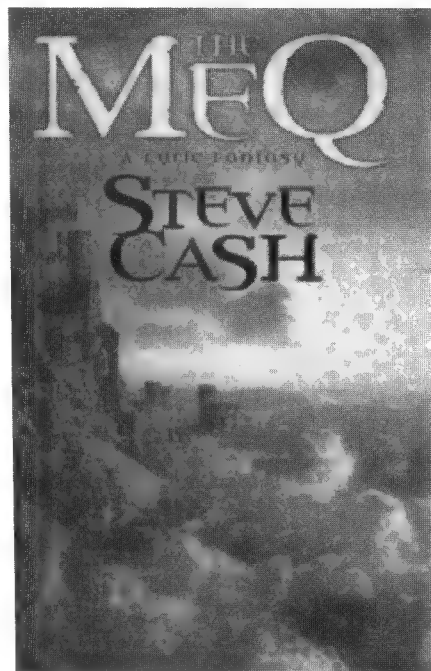
humanity, able to return only affection, which they do copiously. Some humans have adopted them as a kind of talismanic supernatural presence, and give over all their lives to the succour and advancement of the Meq. Others with more selfish motives attempt to capture-and-exploit them, and as a result they become perpetual impotent observers of the cruelty and kindness of the humans that they encounter.

Given their functional immortality, they can afford to watch and wait almost for ever – as an example, the central character spends over ten years just wandering around the Sahara desert in the company of nomads looking for a missing child – and this does make for frustrating reading. Of course there are exciting passages of derring-do and action, and some of the descriptions of the southern United States and indeed of parts of Cornwall near Land's End are so exquisitely detailed it almost seems a shame that they do not, in fact, exist (I can't speak for the southern US, but I know well that piece of Cornwall, and if the place described is there it is folded into a different reality than ours), but the greatest disappointment of the book was getting to the end after all this delay and subterfuge and finding it is intended as the first volume of a trilogy. This is no disrespect to Steve Cash, but I have a deep-seated belief that all of a story should be contained in a single book. Some writers can produce volumes that read as single novels that can then be re-evaluated as parts of trilogies when the other volumes appear – both Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Gwyneth Jones have recently written such works – but at the end of *The Meq*,

although there has been a certain amount of incident, I didn't feel there was any individual story tension that had been resolved within this book, and so I just felt cheated. If the book sells well enough that Macmillan want to continue the series, and if Steve Cash still wants to continue writing it, and if the follow-up books are good enough to publish, and if I'm lucky enough to see the resulting two further books, then I might be able to report back in two or three years time as to whether or not it was worth the wait. Somehow, that chain of events seems too long, and almost certain to break. Which is a shame, because there is a lot of promise in this book, and it really shouldn't have been dissipated in this way.

A far more concise exploration of the vampire theme occurs in Nick Gifford's *Piggies* (Puffin, £4.99). Here, Ben, an adolescent boy, falls through some kind of portal and finds himself in a world similar to his own, but somehow it is subtly different – the street he lives on in his own world doesn't exist in this one, although the rest of the town seems much the same. But the important difference here is that everyone is a vampire, and blood-sharing is considered a familial duty.

The story of Ben's adventures through the looking glass, as it were, are told with a nice economy, but the return to normality that is essential to this kind of young adult-oriented fiction is given a last-line twist that gives a frisson without which, I suspect, the entire novel would have felt a little flat. As it is, it is a superb achievement and appears to have been selling well, so that Nick Gifford's next novel is



well on the way and anxiously awaited by his publisher.

"Nick Gifford" is, of course, the alter ego of Keith Brooke, whose apprenticeship writing fine sf novels (*Keepers of the Peace*, *Expatria*, *Expatria Incorporated* and *Lord of Stone*) has obviously stood him in good stead. He has written a further three novels for Puffin as Gifford, and they promise to be every bit as entertaining as *Piggies*. It is good to see him selling so well at last.

It is moot whether or not Colin Greenland's *Finding Helen* (Black Swan, £6.99) should be considered a vampire novel or not. The clincher is there in the final line, but you'll have to read the entire book to garner the context necessary to seeing what it means, and make your own mind up. I have no intention of giving an opinion one way or the other here, because that would be to destroy the joy of your first reading. And it will be a joy. This is probably Greenland's best book to date, and it would be invidious to ruin anyone's first experience of it. He takes some extremely unpromising material (the minutiae of a minor lecturer's life, dog-walking, and getting around Britain in an old car), mixes into them memories of a fictionalized singer from the 1970s, and serves up an extraordinarily subtle concoction that depicts, perhaps, mid-life crisis and mental collapse in a way we can all relate to without ever feeling in danger of succumbing ourselves.

It is to Greenland's credit that it is nearly impossible to make any certain statement about this book. In a clever first-person voice, he treads a very delicate line between the horrific and the risible, teetering sometimes one way, sometimes the other, but always bringing us back to the knife edge of uncertainty that is his narrative. The overall feel of the book is summed up when the unnamed first person narrator describes the lyrics of *The Fire Queen*, as sung by Helen, the singer who is being sought in the book title – "Taking pain and making it beautiful is what she does" (p 183). The pain for us lies in recognizing ourselves in this palimpsest of trivia, and Greenland's achievement is to make that pain beautiful for us, and thus acceptable. If Greenland has moved away from the fantastic into the mainstream, it is perhaps because the metaphors of the fantastic have become too gross for his purposes. This rich and subtle book is a worthy reward for that departure, and we can only wish him well in his new life out there in the big wide world of literature.

The strong resurgence of fantastic fiction in England proceeds apace. It has been my pleasure to have caught up over the summer with several recent



offerings. Both of Roger Levy's dark near-future novels, *Reckless Sleep* and *Dark Heavens*, left me wanting more, but there I can find nothing scheduled at the moment (except an internet ghost, a novel called *Bad Memory* that doesn't actually exist – this was simply an early title for *Dark Heavens*). Levy is often mentioned favourably in the same sentence as Philip K. Dick. As a great admirer of Dick's work, I have to say the comparison is unfavourable to Levy – his characters are warmer and his vision less mad, although his future is often every bit as bleak. Over on the heroic fantasy front, James Barclay's heroes, The Raven, continue to hew and fry magically through another adventure in *Elfsorrow*, where the entire elf race is threatened with spiritual genocide. Barclay does a marvellous job of weaving a multi-threaded narrative with lots of clever battle set pieces, but I have to say I never really cared for any of his characters. This might be because while this is the first of these stories I have read, it is the second book of the second trilogy featuring them. Serves me right for coming in in the middle of the story.

This is not a problem with Adam Roberts. His latest novel, *Polystom* (Gollancz, £10.99), is his fourth, and each one thus far is different. Each explores life in an unlikely but perfectly possible distorted version of our world – *Salt* concerns the struggle for supremacy between several different human political colonies on the uncompromising surface of the eponymous planet; *On* concerns life on an Earth where gravity is at 90° to our norm so that it feels like everyone lives on a endless cliff-face; and *Stone* is the confession of a mass-murderer to the stone

of the title. To reveal the actual setting for *Polystom* would be an unkindness, for in this novel one of the points is that all is not what it seems. In the other stories, the world is as it seems, and good ingenious scientific rationalisations are given for them. Suffice it to say that in this version of our reality, the solar system is much smaller, so that the worlds share atmosphere and it is possible to fly from world to world, provided you have the resourcefulness to be able to climb out of your aeroplane between the planets and change the propeller for the bigger one necessary for interplanetary flight.

What is uncompromising in all of Roberts's novels is that many of his characters are not particularly pleasant, do reprehensible things, and if there is a character that we might take to, they are usually killed off in some unpleasant fashion. This makes reading Roberts rather a dour experience, but the intellectual exercise that the books offer is some considerable consolation. In *Polystom*, we have the eponymous Polystom who is a high-born duffer who really doesn't understand very much at all, and thus accidentally kills his recalcitrant wife while thinking she is playing tag when in fact she is fleeing his bullying ways. We then meet his uncle, Cleonicles, who has strong right-wing political convictions where Polystom has none, and who is leading an astonishingly perceptive intellectual life as a gentleman scientist. Cleonicles is murdered and in the daze of trying to cope with this loss and his general lonely isolation, Polystom undertakes some rather extraordinary and bizarre responsibilities, and ends up going off to the never-ending war on the Mud planet. Here, the denouement of the ideas laid out in the book is presented, but poor Polystom is left none the wiser.

If you liked Roberts's previous novels, you will like this one. It is of a kind with them, but, in that the characters appear to be little more than ciphers acting out a series of ideas that Roberts wants to discuss, I find them difficult. I want characters who act, and learn, and act, and conclude their story, people I can sympathize with. In Roberts's stories, I get people I wouldn't like if I met them and whose acts I rarely agree with. The ideas that are presented and explored are fascinating – there is an apparently pointless and never-ending war in every book, and the people do try to make the best of impossible situations that look more like cages than homes – but the life of ideas has never been enough for me, and while *Polystom* is undoubtedly a major achievement, it is going to be hard to bring myself to read Roberts's next book unless it is advertised to be radically different.

Paul Brazier

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Abnett, Dan. **Sabbat Martyr.** "Warhammer 40,000. A Gaunt's Ghosts Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-012-2, 319pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Guns of Tanith* [2002], and seventh in the "Gaunt's Ghosts" sub-series; the author is a comics writer who resides in Maidstone, Kent, and has become a mainstay of GW's Black Library fiction factory.) *August 2003.*

Armstrong, Kelley. **Stolen.** Time Warner, ISBN 0-7515-3241-X, 532pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dominic Harman, £6.99. (Supernatural thriller, first published in the USA [?], 2001; follow-up to *Bitten* [2001], in this new series about a sexy werewolf girl; according to a reviewer in the *Daily Express*, the heroine "makes Buffy look fluffy" – a line cunningly calculated to be quoted everywhere, including here.) *7th August 2003.*

Asaro, Catherine. **Skyfall.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30638-7, 317pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the ninth in this Nebula Award-winning scientist-author's "Saga of the Skolian Empire" series.) *September 2003.*

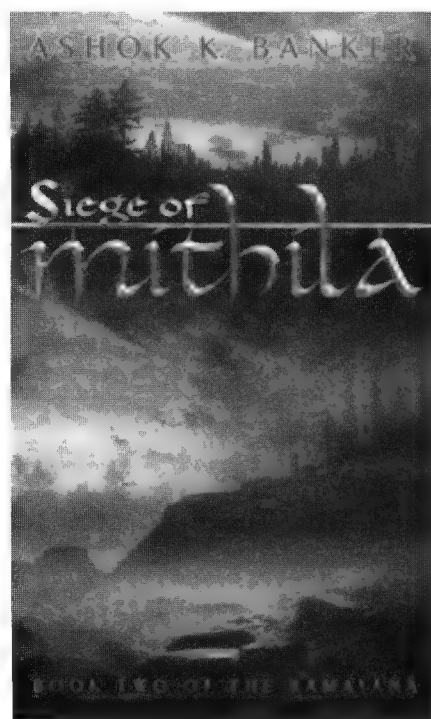
Baker, Kage. **The Anvil of the World.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30818-5, 350pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Kidd, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the first of a likely series, and Baker's first fantasy after specializing mainly in time-travel sf, the publishers commend it by making noises about "Dunsany and Clark Ashton Smith ... Jack Vance and Thorne Smith" – which sounds promising!) *28th August 2003.*

Ballard, J. G. **Millennium People.** Flamingo, ISBN 0-00-225848-X, 294pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Non-sf [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first edition; like JGB's last two novels, *Cocaine Nights* [1996] and *Super-Cannes* [2000], it's cast in the form of a psychological thriller, but unlike those it's set in present-day England – a country where the middle classes are revolting; insofar as it depicts events which "haven't happened yet" [e.g. the bombing of Tate Modern and the burning down of the National Film Theatre], it's sf of a kind; it's also a black comedy of ideas.) *15th September 2003.*

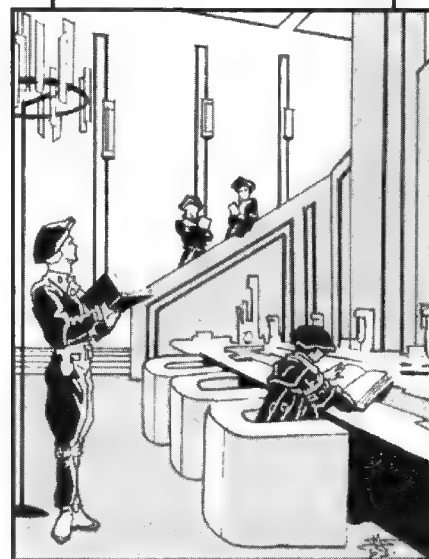
Banker, Ashok K. **Siege of Mithila: Book Two of the Ramayana.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-198-5, 531pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a rapid follow-up to *Prince of Ayodhya* [2003]; Banker is a 38-year-old writer living in Mumbai [Bombay], India, who has published two short stories in *Interzone* and a handful in American magazines, as well as a copious amount of fiction and journalism in his home country; this trilogy re-tells, in modern style, the story of one of the old Indian epic poems, *The Ramayana* by Valmiki; recommended to those who are looking for something lushly different.) *September 2003.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Coalescent: Destiny's Children, Book 1.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07423-X, 473pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there will be a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen], priced at £12.99; partly set in ancient Rome, partly in the near future, and concerning genetics, this is the beginning of yet another magnum opus from Steve Baxter, whose creative energy continues to astound; we have begun to lose track of the number of books – novels, collections, novellas, non-fiction works – that he has published recently; they include, we hear tell, a biography of the 18th-century geologist James Hutton.) *9th October 2003.*

Baxter, Stephen. **Evolution.** "A novel." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07409-4, 762pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; billed as "the epic story of life on Earth told by the natural heir to Arthur C. Clarke," it's an episodic



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blockbuster about primate evolution – from 65 million years ago to now; no one could accuse Mr Baxter of being unambitious in his choice of themes; reviewed, favourably, by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 188.) *29th August 2003.*

Bear, Greg. **Vitals.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-712975-0, 342pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; like Bear's biological thrillers *Darwin's Radio* [1999] and *Darwin's Children* [2003], it is being marketed for the mainstream Michael Crichton audience, rather than as part of HarperCollins's more generic Voyager list; reviewed by John Grant in *Interzone* 177.) *1st September 2003.*

Bradbury, Ray. **Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales.** Morrow, ISBN 0-06-054242-X, xvii+893pp, hardcover, \$29.95. (Sf/fantasy/horror/mainstream collection, first edition; a bumper gathering of weird and wonderful short stories; astonishingly, there are no overlaps between this new tome and the author's previous omnibus of similar size, *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* [Knopf, 1980]; some well-known are gems here, at least a couple of dozen of Bradbury's very best, but not all of the contents are familiar: there are no less than 14 previously uncollected stories, including items from *Weird Tales* [1940s], *Galaxy* [1950s], *Fantasy & Science Fiction* [1960s], and from a slew of slick magazines of more recent decades.) *5th August 2003.*

Britain, Kristen. **First Rider's Call**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6113-4, vii+639pp, C-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; a rather delayed follow-up to the author's debut *Big Commercial Fantasy*, *Green Rider* [1998].) 1st September 2003.

Brooke, Keith, and Nick Gevers, eds. **Infinity Plus Two**. Introduction by John Clute. PS Publishing [98 High Ash Drive, Leeds LS17 8RE], ISBN 1-902880-58-7, 282pp, hardcover, cover by Richard Powers, £45. (Sf anthology, first edition; this is a signed edition [i.e. signed by all the contributors, on two specially bound-in pages], limited to 500 numbered copies; it contains 13 stories, by Stephen Baxter, Terry Bisson, Eric Brown, Lisa Goldstein, Paul McAuley, Ian McDonald, Vonda N. McIntyre, Michael Moorcock, Paul Park, Adam Roberts, Lucius Shepard, Brian Stableford and Charles Stross [a completely different line-up from the previous volume, *Infinity Plus One*], which have appeared online in the electronic magazine *Infinity Plus*; most are reprinted from other sources, such as the US magazines *Asimov's SF*, *F&SF*, and *Science Fiction Age* and various original anthologies; Moorcock's "Cheering for the Rockets" first appeared in *Interzone*; overall, it looks to be a good selection of material.) Dated "May," but received in August 2003.

Brooks, Terry. **Jarka Ruus: High Druid of Shannara, [Book One]**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6124-X, 398pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; the first volume in a new trilogy, in Brooks's popular but interminable "Shannara" series.) 22nd September 2003.

Brooks, Terry. **Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life**. Introduction by Elizabeth George. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-6879-1, ix+197pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Reminiscences and tips by a bestselling fantasy writer, first published in the USA, 2003; according to the blurb, it's "more than just a writing guide... Here are sketches of his midwestern boyhood, when comic books, radio serials, and a vivid imagination launched a lifelong passion for weaving tales of wonder.") 22nd September 2003.

Brust, Steven. **The Lord of Castle Black: Book Two of The Viscount of Adrilankha**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85582-6, 397pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Bowman, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *The Paths of the Dead* [2002], which in turn was a follow-up to Brust's previous fantastic swashbucklers, *The Phoenix Guards*

[1991] and *Five Hundred Years After* [1994]; the whole series is designed on the plan of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* [1844], *Twenty Years After* [1845] and the multi-volume *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne* [1847-1850]; the initials "P.J.F." appear after the author's name on the title page of the book, but not on the cover – they stand for "Pre-Joycean Fellowship" [Joycean as in James Joyce], an anti-literary point that hardly needs rubbing in given Brust's evident debt to Dumas.) 1st August 2003.

Burns, Michael. **Digital Fantasy Painting**. "A step-by-step guide to creating fantasy art on your computer." Collins, ISBN 0-00-716003-8, 160pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Heavily-illustrated "how-to" fantasy-art manual, first edition [?]; there is a statement of copyright attributed to "The Ilex Press Limited 2001" – which may indicate the existence of a previous edition, although it's by no means clear.) 4th August 2003.

Campbell, Ramsey. **Told by the Dead**. Introduction by Poppy Z. Brite. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-69-2, 359pp, hardcover, cover by David Kendall, £35. (Horror collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous deluxe slipcased edition [not seen] priced at £60; in both states, it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered trade copies and 200 numbered slipcased copies; there are 23 stories, a few of them dating from as far back as the 1970s but the majority recent – i.e. first published within the last five or six years; it looks to be another essential Campbell collection.) Dated "June," but received in August 2003.

Carter, Lin. **Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings**. New edition. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07548-1, 188pp, hardcover,

£6.99. (Critical study of the leading fantasist and his best-known work; first published in the USA, 1969; this is a small-hardcover reissue, at a paperback price, of the late Lin Carter's fairly lightweight Tolkien primer; it has been "fully revised and updated" by the British sf writer and literary academic, Adam Roberts.) 31st August 2003.

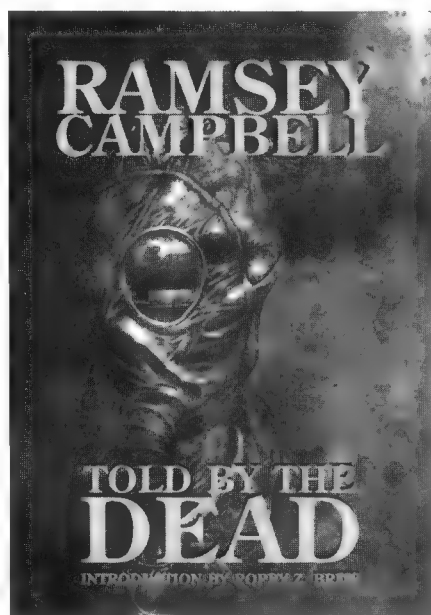
Chiang, Ted. **Stories of Your Life and Others**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30419-8, 333pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 2002; here we have something unusual: a debut collection of stories by a writer who has been around for a dozen years but has written no novels; moreover, this volume contains *all* of his published stories to date, just eight of them [one of which is original to the book]; which goes to show that it *can still be done* – in the sf field a major reputation can be built on short stories alone; reviewed, favourably, by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 184.) Late entry: 8th July publication, received in August 2003.

Clark, Simon. **Vampyrhic Rites**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-81941-3, 504pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2003; it's a yarn about vampires on the North Yorkshire Moors; in this case, the mass-market paperback seems to follow the hardcover by only six weeks.) 1st September 2003.

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch Star: Book Five of The Banned and the Banished**. "The stunning final volume." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-244-2, 739pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; the sequel to *Wit'ch Fire* [1998], *Wit'ch Storm* [1999], *Wit'ch War* [2001] and *Wit'ch Gate* [2001], it's copyrighted in the name of Jim Czajkowski.) August 2003.

Clement, Hal. **Noise**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30857-6, 252pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a "new planetary adventure" from "the dean of hard science fiction" [as the blurb states]; "Hal Clement" is the pseudonym of retired science teacher Harry C. Stubbs [born 1922]; it is 53 years since his first novel, *Needle* [1950], appeared – and it seems he still favours those good old one-word titles.) September 2003.

Clute, John. **Scores: Reviews 1993-2003**. Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-48-2, x+428pp, trade paperback, cover by Judith Clute, £14. (Collection of reviews of sf/fantasy/horror books, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, limited, hardcover edition [not seen], priced at £35; a follow-up to Clute's earlier



essay/review collections, *Strokes* [1988] and *Look at the Evidence* [1996], this is another hefty compilation, containing most of the shorter material he wrote between 1993 and 2002; many of these reviews first appeared in *Interzone*, but others come from *Foundation*, the *Independent*, the *New Statesman*, the *New York Review of SF*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Toronto Globe & Mail*, the *Washington Post* and the on-line "virtual" magazine *Science Fiction Weekly*; it's an impressive, heavyweight body of criticism by sf's most serious non-academic critic: highly recommended; the volume also contains a full index, compiled by Leigh [Kennedy] Priest; see the website of publisher Roger Robinson – beccan@dia1.pipex.com – for details of how to order.) 18th September 2003.

Cole, Stephen. **Timeless.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48607-4, 275pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, with Fitz and Angie.) 4th August 2003.

Condon, Paul. **The Matrix: Unlocked: An Unauthorised Review of the Matrix Phenomenon.** Contender Books [48 Margaret St. London W1W 8SE], ISBN 1-84357-093-9, 249pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Sf movie-series guide, first edition; an account of the lore and legend generated by the cyberpunkish films *The Matrix* [1999] and *The Matrix: Reloaded* [2002], and by what's known so far of the imminently forthcoming third movie, *The Matrix: Revolutions*, this is described in the blurb as "the premier book written by a fan, for the fans"; it's unillustrated, and begins slightly incongruously with a phrase from Jane Austen: "It is a truth universally acknowledged...") 28th August 2003.

Constantine, Storm. **The Enchantments of Flesh and Spirit: The First Book of the Wraeththu Chronicles.** "Revised 2003 Edition." Immanion Press [8 Rowley Grove, Stafford ST17 9BJ], ISBN 0-954-50360-0, 345pp, trade paperback, cover by Ruby, £12.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1987; the first product of a small press which promises to publish a wide range of material, this new edition of Storm Constantine's debut novel has been considerably revised, "incorporating new material, scenes and refinements," including a new introduction, three appendices and a glossary; see the publishers' website – www.immanionpress.wox.org – to order.) August 2003.

Crichton, Michael. **Prey.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-715453-4, xiv+528pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published simultaneously in the USA and UK, 2002;

Crichton's most recent super-thriller, aimed as usual at the mainstream audience, is on the by-now hoary old sf theme of nanotechnology [scientist K. Eric Drexler is duly credited]; the "prey" of the title is the human race.) 4th August 2003.

Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. **The Lady of the Sorrows: The Bitterbynde, Book II.** Tor (UK), ISBN 0-330-48956-9, xi+625pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; sequel to *The Ill-Made Mute* [2001], which was reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 173.) 1st August 2003.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror: Sixteenth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-31425-6, cxxxiv+564pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$19.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$35.95 [not seen]; as usual, the prefatory material is massive in extent, with detailed year's summations by the two editors, a film-and-TV summation by Edward Bryant, a "Manga and Anime" round-up by Joan D. Vinge, a comics round-up, obituaries, etc; the body of the anthology contains reprint stories and poems, all first published in 2002, by M. Shayne Bell, Ramsey Campbell, Peter Dickinson, Tom Disch, Terry Dowling, Jeffrey Ford [twice], Christopher Fowler, Karen Joy Fowler, Neil Gaiman [twice], Stephen Gallagher, Elizabeth Hand, Brian Hodge [twice], Graham Joyce, Kathe Koja, Joel Lane, Kelly Link, Bentley Little, Robin McKinley, China Miéville, Haruki Murakami, Kim Newman, Adam Roberts, Nicholas Royle [twice], Jay Russell, Lucy Taylor, Conrad Williams, Zoran



Zivkovic ["The Violin-Maker," from *Interzone*] and host of other, less-familiar names; recommended.) 29th August 2003.

De Lint, Charles. **Spirits in the Wires.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87398-0, 448pp, hardcover, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; yet another large work set in de Lint's imaginary city of Newford – "where magic lights dark streets, where myths walk in modern shapes" – and written in his characteristic urban-fantasy vein.) 28th August 2003.

Dick, Philip K. **Solar Lottery.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07455-8, 188pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1955; this was Dick's debut book – published in Britain at the time as *World of Chance*, which text differed somewhat; this edition follows the American [Ace Books] text.) 14th August 2003.

Di Filippo, Paul. **Fuzzy Dice.** Introduction by Rudy Rucker. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-66-8, 296pp, hardcover, cover by Todd Schorr, £35. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous deluxe slipcased edition [not seen] priced at £60; in both states, it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered trade copies and 200 numbered slipcased copies; the plot is wildly picaresque, features much dimension-hopping, and looks like great fun.) Dated "June," but received in August 2003.

Drake, David. **Goddess of the Ice Realm.** "A new volume in the saga of *Lord of the Isles*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87388-3, 496pp, hardcover, cover by Donato, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; more Big Commercial Fantasy bloat, a follow-up to *Lord of the Isles* [1997], *Queen of Demons* [1998] and *Servant of the Dragon* [1999] and *Mistress of the Catacombs* [2001].) 24th September 2003.

Effinger, George Alec. **Budayeen Nights.** Foreword and story introductions by Barbara Hambly. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-19-3, xi+235pp, hardcover, cover by John Picacio, \$24.95. (Sf collection, first edition; George Alec Effinger [1947-2002], who had long suffered from ill-health and other misfortunes, died last year; this posthumous volume, edited by Marty Halpern, brings together his nine "Budayeen" tales – all of which are linked, in terms of their near-future North African setting, to his trilogy of novels, *When Gravity Fails* [1987], *A Fire in the Sun* [1989] and *The Exile Kiss* [1991]; seven of the stories are reprinted from various magazines and anthologies, and two are original to this book; it's another nicely-designed volume from Golden Gryphon, their 28th; to order, see the



publishers' website:
www.goldengryphon.com.) September 2003.

Elliott, Kate. *The Gathering Storm: Volume Five of Crown of Stars.*

Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-200-0, 1037pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melvin Grant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen; these Big Commercial Fantasies just get bigger and bigger and bigger...) August 2003.

Erikson, Steven. *House of Chains: A Tale of the Malazan Book of the Fallen.*

Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81313-7, 1021pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; fourth of a promised ten-volume sequence by this Canadian author; it begins: "Grey, bloated and pocked, the bodies lined the silt-laden shoreline for as far as the eye could see. Heaped like driftwood by the rising water, bobbing and rolling on the edges, the putrefying flesh seethed with black-shelled, ten-lagged crabs...") 4th September 2003.

Etchison, Dennis, Ramsey Campbell and Jack Dann, eds. *Gathering the Bones: Original Stories from the World's Masters of Horror.*

Tor, ISBN 0-765-30179-2, 447pp, trade paperback, cover by Kamil Vojnar, \$15.95. (Horror anthology, first edition; an impressive tome containing all-new American, British and Australian stories by Russell Blackford, Ray Bradbury, Isobelle Carmody, Peter Crowther, Stephen Dedman, Sara Douglass, Terry Dowling, George Clayton Johnson, Graham Joyce, Joel Lane, Rosaleen Love, Kim Newman, Mike O'Driscoll, Michael Marshall Smith, Melanie Tem, Steve Rasnic Tem, Thomas Tessier, Lisa Tuttle, Janeen Webb, the late Cherry Wilder, Gahan Wilson and others; each editor seems to have commissioned fiction from his own backyard – even the American material is mainly by Californians [that's where Dennis Etchison resides]; this looks as though it may be the original horror anthology of the year.) 23rd August 2003.

Feist, Raymond E. *Talon of the Silver Hawk: Conclave of Shadows, Book One.*

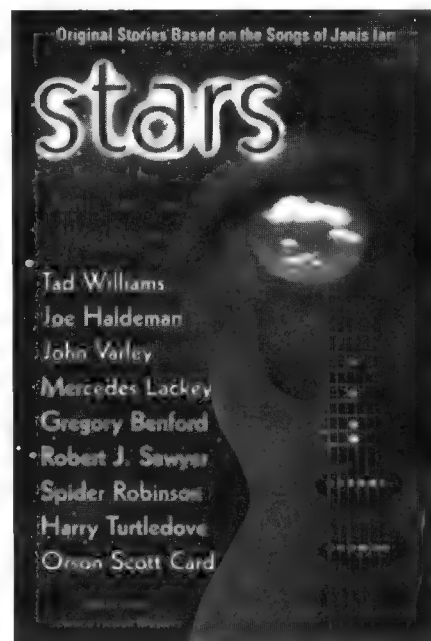
Voyager, ISBN 0-00-716185-9, 390pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin McKenna, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the opening of "a powerful new epic fantasy series from one of the great masters of the genre"; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 184.) 4th August 2003.

Fisher, Jude. ***Wild Magic: Book Two of Fool's Gold.*** Earthlight, 0-7434-6128-2, 565pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there may be a simultaneous hardcover



edition [not seen]; sequel to *Sorcery Rising* [2002] in this Icelandic-flavoured high fantasy trilogy; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins/Voyager editor Jane Johnson, who has previously written several cat fantasies in collaboration with M. John Harrison under the joint pseudonym "Gabriel King.") 4th August 2003.

Goodkind, Terry. ***Naked Empire.*** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-714557-8, 660pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; it's described in the publishers' press release as a "standalone": so, having completed his seven-volume "Sword of Truth" series [published in the UK by Orion/Millennium], this new tome seems to represent a fresh departure for Goodkind,



although it's still in the Big Commercial Fantasy mode.) 4th August 2003.

Herbert, Brian, and Kevin J. Anderson. ***The Machine Crusade: Legends of Dune, 2.*** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-82333-X, 664pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £18.99. (Sf spinoff novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen], priced at £10.99; second in a trilogy which is a follow-up to the "Prelude to Dune" trilogy which was a prequel to the late Frank Herbert's bestselling *Dune* [1965] – by the original author's son, Brian, and his prolific jack-of-all-trades collaborator Kevin Anderson.) 1st September 2003.

Herbert, James. ***Nobody True.*** Macmillan, ISBN 1-405-00519-X, 394pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; it concerns out-of-body experiences, a "ghost" and a serial killer; not to be confused with the above-mentioned American family of Herberts, James Herbert is, in the words of his publishers, "Britain's Number One bestselling writer of chiller fiction, whose 20 novels have sold more than 50 million copies worldwide.") 19th September 2003.

Heuser, Sabine. *Virtual Geographies: Cyberpunk at the Intersection of the Postmodern and Science Fiction.*

"Postmodern Studies, 34." Editions Rodopi [Tijnmuiden 7, 1046 AK Amsterdam, Netherlands], ISBN 90-420-0986-1, xlv+257pp, trade paperback, no sterling price shown [50 euros or US\$60]. (Critical study of cyberpunk sf, first edition; the author teaches English and Cultural Studies at Philipps University, Marburg, Germany; her book is described as "the first detailed study to offer a working definition of cyberpunk within the postmodern force field... The main proponents of cyberpunk are analyzed in depth along with the virtual landscapes they have created – William Gibson's *Cyberspace*, Pat Cadigan's *Mindscapes*, and Neal Stephenson's *Metaverse*...") No date shown: received in August 2003.

Hutson, Sean. ***Hell to Pay.*** Time Warner, ISBN 0-316-86077-8, ix+369pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £15.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; this is the first new Sean Hutson novel we have received for review since *Warhol's Prophecy* [1999], but in the meantime there seem to have been others – with titles like *Compulsion* and *Hybrid* – which we have missed.) 7th August 2003.

Ian, Janis, and Mike Resnick, eds. ***Stars: Original Stories Based on the Songs of Janis Ian.*** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0177-1, xi+544pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy

anthology, first edition; it contains 30 all-original stories inspired by singer-songwriter Janis Ian's work [she "burst on the music scene at the age of 14 with her controversial saga of interracial love, 'Society's Child,'" and since then her 17 albums have sold in the millions]; contributors include Janis Ian herself, together with a strong line-up of other writers: Kage Baker, Stephen Baxter, Gregory Benford, Terry Bisson, Orson Scott Card, Diane Duane, David Gerrold, Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Mercedes Lackey, Tanith Lee, Barry N. Malzberg, Susan R. Matthews, Spider Robinson, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Robert J. Sawyer, Robert Sheckley, Judith Tarr, Harry Turtledove, John Varley, Howard Waldrop, Tad Williams, Jane Yolen and a few others; although he's not named as a co-editor, the copyright of this volume is shared by Tekno Books, which is Martin H. Greenberg's company.) *August 2003.*

Irvine, Ian. **Tetrarch: Volume Two of The Well of Echoes.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-210-8, 692pp, C-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £12.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2002; follow-up to *Geomancer* [2001] in this new series of Big Commercial Fantasies by the author of the "View from the Mirror" quartet; Irvine was born in Australia in 1950, and has a PhD in marine sciences.) *August 2003.*

Jones, J. V. **A Fortress of Grey Ice: Book Two of Sword of Shadows.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30633-6, 671pp, hardcover, cover by Jean Pierre Targete, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; follow-up to *A Cavern of Black Ice* [1999]; although Julie Jones resides in America [San Diego, CA], this is the first US edition, appearing well over a year after the British edition.) *28th August 2003.*

Jones, Mark, and Lance Parkin. **Beyond the Final Frontier: An Unauthorised Review of the Star Trek Universe on Television and Film.** Contender Books [48 Margaret St. London W1V 8SE], ISBN 1-84357-080-7, 400pp, trade paperback, £16.99. (Sf TV-series episode guide, first edition; a large-format, lightly illustrated tome, it contains exhaustive "season summaries" and detailed information on "characters, episodes, movies"; there is also a full index.) *25th September 2003.*

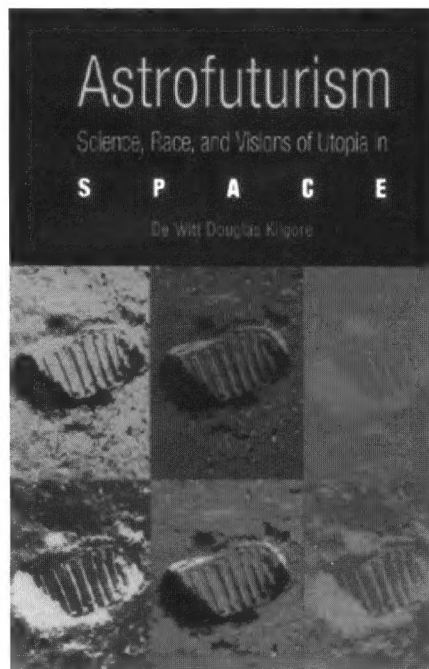
Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. **Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space.** University of Pennsylvania Press, ISBN 0-8122-1847-7, 294pp, trade paperback, \$19.95 [£14 in UK]. (Study of the uses of the near-future space-travel theme in sf and popular science; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$55 [£38.50]; the author teaches

English at Indiana University, and is African-American; long-time radical prof and sf critic H. Bruce Franklin [author of *War Stars*] commends the book – which does look interesting; states the blurb: "In response to criticism inspired by the civil rights movement and the new left, astrofuturists imagined space frontiers that could extend the reach of the human species and heal its historical wounds" – which sounds like a politically-correct redefinition of the traditional burden of 20th-century American sf, from Heinlein to Roddenberry and beyond.) *Late entry: 30th June publication, received in August 2003.*

King, Stephen. **The Drawing of the Three: The Dark Tower, II.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82976-1, xvi+455pp, paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; this edition, possibly revised, carries the same new introduction as the first volume in the series [see below].) *18th August 2003.*

King, Stephen. **The Gunslinger: The Dark Tower, I.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-82975-3, xxv+238pp, paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982; it's actually a fix-up of a story-cycle which first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1978-1981; this is a revised edition, and has a new introduction and foreword by the author, dated 2003.) *18th August 2003.*

Koontz, Dean. **The Face.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713069-4, 608pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; this represents a change of publisher for Koontz, who until now has been published



in Britain by Headline [since that company's inception in the 1980s].) *4th August 2003.*

Kress, Nancy. **Nothing Human.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-18-5, 300pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it concerns global warming and other disasters, and salvation for the human race via genetic engineering; this is another well-designed volume from Golden Gryphon, their 27th; to order, see the publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com.) *September 2003.*

Langford, David. **The Leaky Establishment.** Introduction by Terry Pratchett. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-125-5, 216pp, trade paperback, cover by George Parkin, \$17.95. (Humorous mainstream novel about nuclear research, by a well-known sf personality; first published in the UK, 1984; this edition seems to follow the text of the Big Engine edition of 2001, complete with Pratchett introduction; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; to order, see the website: www.wildsidepress.com.) *No date shown: received in August 2003.*

Langford, David, and John Grant. **Earthdoom!** "The End of the Disaster Novel as We Know It?" BeWrite Books [363 Badminton Rd., Nibley, Bristol BS37 5JF], ISBN 1-904492-11-8, 283pp, trade paperback, cover by Ivan Lloyd Smith, £9.80. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the UK, 1987; "John Grant" is a pseudonym of Paul Barnett; this egregious work, which takes the mickey out of all manner of sf disaster scenarios, has long been unavailable [it was originally published by Grafton, and was visible for about five minutes in 1987], although a follow-up, *Guts: A Comedy of Manners*, was published by Cosmos Books in 2001; see the publishers' website – www.bewrite.net – to order.) *No date shown: received in August 2003.*

Levinson, Paul. **The Pixel Eye.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30556-9, 334pp, hardcover, cover by Shelley Eshkar, \$24.95. (Sf/crime novel, first edition; a follow-up to the author's earlier books, *The Silk Code* [1999] and *The Consciousness Plague* [2002], also featuring his scientific detective Phil D'Amato; the hero's adventures are set "against a backdrop of near-future, post-9/11 New York City.") *6th August 2003.*

Lindskold, Jane. **The Dragon of Despair.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30259-4, 670pp, hardcover, cover by Julie Bell, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Through Wolf's Eyes*



[2001] and *Wolf's Head, Wolf's Heart* [2002]; like its predecessors, it's "a tale of humane wolves, beastly men, and a brilliant heroine.") 27th August 2003.

McKenna, Juliet E. **Southern Fire.** "Book One of the Aldabreshin Compass." Orbit 1-84149-166-7, 600pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the start of a new series for Ms McKenna, following her five-volume epic "Tale of Einarinn.") September 2003.

MacLeod, Ken. **Engine City: Engines of Light, Book Three.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-203-5, 369pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; conclusion to in the space-operatic trilogy which began with *Cosmonaut Keep* [2000] and *Dark Light* [2001].) September 2003.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Darknesses: The Second Book of the Korean Chronicles.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30704-9, 492pp, hardcover, cover by Daniel Horne, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Legacies* [2002] in this new series from the super-prolific Modesitt, it's set in a world where "millennia ago, ago a magical disaster caused the fall of a great civilization"; the map on the book's endpapers makes this imaginary realm look rather like the continental United States of America turned into a huge island.) 22nd August 2003.

Nicholls, Stan. **Quicksilver Rising: Book One of the Quicksilver Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-714149-1, 410pp, C-format paperback, cover by Dominic Harman, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "a powerful new epic fantasy filled with spectacular magic, action, adventure and political intrigue"; like American authors Terry Goodkind and Dean Koontz [see above], British writer Nicholls has made the move to HarperCollins, who seem to be trying to freshen their "Voyager" list.) 4th August 2003.

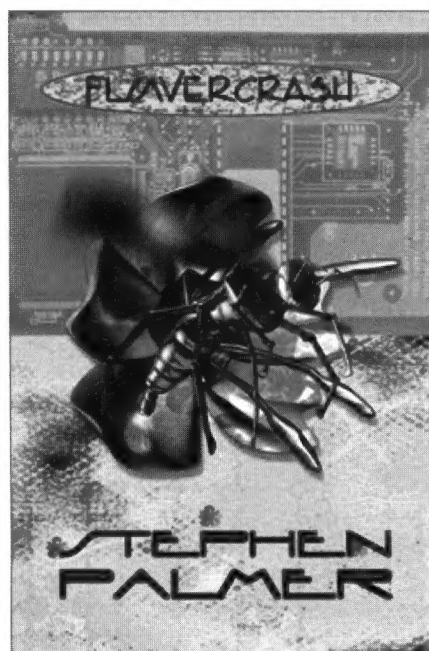
Niven, Larry. **Scatterbrain.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30137-7, 317pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf and non-fiction collection, first edition; as its ruefully honest title indicates, this is a ragbag of a book from an author who no longer writes much that's new – a bit of fiction, a bit of non-fiction, extracts from this and that...) 22nd August 2003.

O'Mahony, Daniel. **The Cabinet of Light.** Foreword by Chaz Brenchley. Frontispiece by John Higgins. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-19-7, 121pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover; not seen]

priced at £10; the limited "deluxe edition" which has been sent as a review copy is signed by author, illustrator and foreword-writer; this is the ninth in a series of handsomely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from David J. Howe and Stephen James Walker's Telos imprint; for ordering information see their website: www.telos.co.uk.) Late entry: 10th July publication, received in August 2003.

Palmer, Stephen. **Flowercrash.** Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-58715-449-8, 346pp, trade paperback, cover by George Cairns \$19.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a fourth novel from the British author of *Memory Seed* [1996], *Glass* [1997] and the delayed *Muezzin-land* [2002], it's set in "a far-future paradise" of "artificial flower networks so complex they combine to create virtual realities"; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; see the website – www.wildsidepress.com – to order.) Late entry (?): it states "copyright 2002" inside, but received by us in August 2003.

Pratchett, Terry. **Monstrous Regiment.** "A Discworld novel." Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60340-1, 352pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Kidby, £17.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; the 28th "Discworld" novel, this one concerns the adventures of one Polly Perks, who disguises herself as a boy and joins the army; the publishers have a new back-cover quote in praise of the author, from an unnamed reviewer in the *Times*: "Like Jonathan Swift, Pratchett uses his world to hold up a distorting mirror to our own, and like Swift he is a satirist of enormous talent...") 1st October 2003.



Rayner, Jacqueline. **Wolfsbane.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48609-0, 245pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Fourth and Eighth Doctors, with Sarah Jane and Harry – and the Holy Grail.) 1st September 2003.

Remic, Andy. **Spiral.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-147-0, 532pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Scutt, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer who lives in Manchester; not really aimed at the sf readership, it's described as "a fast-paced, high-octane, near-future techno thriller for fans of Andy McNab and Matthew Reilly.") August 2003.

Sagan, Nick. **Idlewild.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-05190-4, 278pp, hardcover, £10. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; a late-21st-century thriller about a bio-menace, indubitably sf but pitched at the mainstream audience, this is a debut novel by the son of the late astronomer and science-popularizer, Carl Sagan; unfortunately, the title *Idlewild* is already spoken for – the British writer Mark Lawson published an alternate-world sf novel of that name in 1995.) 7th August 2003.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Hybrids.** "The stunning conclusion of the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87690-4, 396pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to *Hominids* [2002] and *Humans* [2003], in a trilogy concerning the encounter between modern humans and a Neanderthal civilization in a parallel timestream.) September 2003.

Schmidt, Stanley. **Argonaut.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87727-7, 333pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Pollack, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; Schmidt's first new novel in many years [he has been busy editing *Analog* magazine], it concerns a near-future alien invasion of Earth.) 11th August 2003.

Silverberg, Robert. **Roma Eterna.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07354-3, 385pp, C-format paperback, cover by Emma Wallace, £10.99. (Episodic alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £16.99; this is a "fix-up," consisting of ten stories which first appeared in *Asimov's SF Magazine* and elsewhere over a long period, 1989-2002; one of Silverberg's most interesting works [for those of us who enjoy historical speculation], it deals with a world in which Christianity and Islam never arose and the Roman Empire never fell.) 28th August 2003.

Simmons, Dan. **Ilium**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07260-1, 576pp, C-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £17.99; this, Simmons's first substantial sf novel in almost a decade, is a retelling of *The Iliad* in space-operatic terms – although there are also elements borrowed from Shakespeare; it's blurbed as "a thought-provoking, immensely involving, fantastically exciting novel," and Peter F. Hamilton adds his voice to the praise, claiming that Simmons blends together "a host of wondrous themes, ideas, and legends into something that sets the standard for SF in the new century.") 21st August 2003.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil. **Daniel F. Galouye: Counterfeiter of Worlds—A Working Bibliography**. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 57." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-64-5, x+24pp, small-press paperback [A5, saddle-stitched], £2. (Sf author bibliography, first edition; Daniel Francis Galouye [1920-1976] is pretty much forgotten today, although his novels *Dark Universe* [1961] and *Counterfeit World* [1964 – filmed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, no less] were popular in their day; he wrote a goodly amount of other fiction, and it's all expertly detailed here; recommended, as usual with this series, to the bibliophiles.) August 2003.

Stephenson, Neal. **Quicksilver: Volume One of the Baroque Cycle**. Heinemann, ISBN 0-434-00817-6, x+927pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Quasi-sf post-modernist historical novel, first published in the USA, 2003; this trendy American author's huge new opus, his first since the bestselling *Cryptonomicon* [1999], has already been garnering praise; as was the previous work, it's a sprawling, Pynchonesque fantasy-of-history – and it's billed as the first volume of a trilogy which will be, overall, a *prequel* to the earlier book; set in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, mainly in Britain and Europe, according to the publicity it features "a cast of characters that includes Newton, Christopher Wren and the young Benjamin Franklin"; eat your heart out, Peter Ackroyd.) 2nd October 2003.

Stross, Charles. **Singularity Sky**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-01072-5, 313pp, hardcover, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; it's touted by Michael Swanwick as "a carnival of ideas disguised as a space opera, a joyous romp through the toybox of the imagination by a guy who's universally acknowledged to be the Next Big Thing in

science fiction"; although he has been around as a writer for well over a decade, this is the first novel by sometime *Interzone* contributor Charles Stross [born in Leeds, Yorkshire, in 1964] to reach book form – although another was serialized in the magazine *Spectrum SF* a year or two ago and is due out, we believe, as a book fairly soon.) 5th August 2003.

Turtledove, Harry. **Conan of Venarium**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30466-X, 269pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel-by-another-hand to Robert E. Howard's 1930s yarns of swords and sorcery; the "Conan" franchise trundles on [unmentioned by most critics and reviewers], and now here is Mr Turtledove contributing to it for the first time; he dedicates the book, appropriately enough, to the memories of Howard, L. Sprague de Camp and Poul Anderson.) August 2003.

Van Gelder, Gordon, ed. **One Lamp: Alternate History Stories from The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction**. Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., Room 503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-276-5, viii+433pp, trade paperback, cover by J. T. Lindroos, \$15.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; it consists of 14 reprint stories, on alternate-historical themes, by Poul Anderson, Alfred Bester, Ben Bova, Bradley Denton, Paul Di Filippo, C. M. Kornbluth, Paul McAuley, Maureen F. McHugh, James Morrow, Robert Silverberg, Harry Turtledove and others; a solid "theme" anthology, ranging from old favourites to some of last year's work; recommended.) 18th August 2003.

Varley, John. **The Ophiuchi Hotline**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz,

ISBN 0-575-07283-0, 180pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1977; this was Varley's debut, and lively and stimulating it seemed at the time...) 21st August 2003.

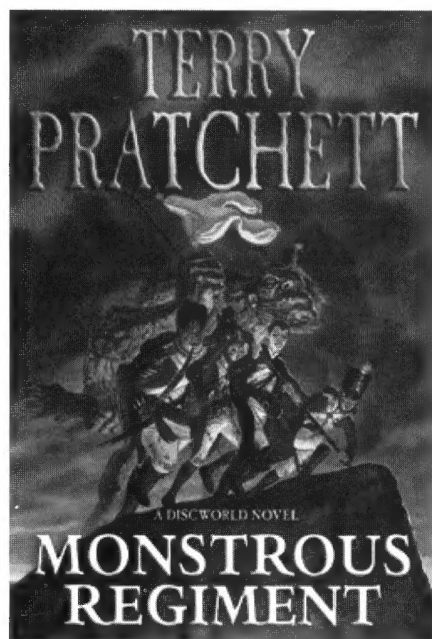
Williams, Walter Jon. **Destiny's Way**. "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/LucasBooks, ISBN 0-09-941047-8, xiv+451pp, A-format paperback, cover by Cliff Nielsen, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2002; to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time Walter Jon Williams has dipped his toe into the waters of spinoffery.) 7th August 2003.

Williamson, Jack. **Darker Than You Think**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 38." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07546-5, 266pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1948; a captivating old tale of werewolf-ism, it originally appeared in shorter form in *Unknown* magazine in 1940.) 14th August 2003.

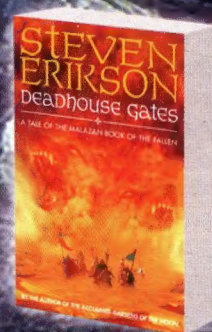
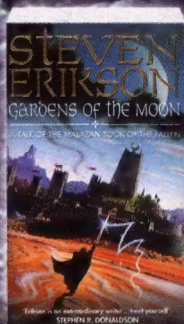
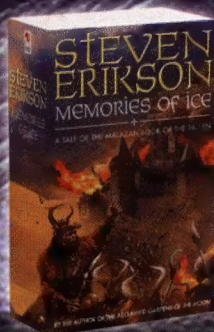
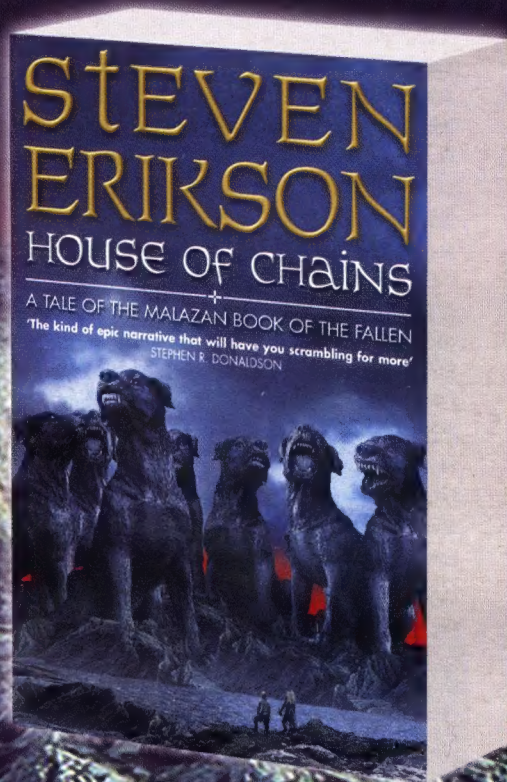
Wood, Patrick. **Viaduct Child**. Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-97823-8, 251pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Juvenile sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a debut book by a new British writer [born in Leeds, 1968], this is the latest in Scholastic's ambitious line of older kids' "literary fiction" [their term], following such items as Chris Wooding's *The Haunting of Alaiabel Cray* [2001] and Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* [2001].) No date shown: September [?] 2003.

Wright, Sydney Fowler. **Deluge**. Edited by Brian Stableford. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6660-8, lviii+330pp, trade paperback, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1927; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$65; the author [1874-1965] was British, and this catastrophe novel made him, briefly, a bestseller – it even formed the basis of a long-lost Hollywood film [1933]; this well-produced edition, with its extensive introduction and notes by the expert Brian Stableford, is most welcome as a contribution to the history of sf.) 13th August 2003.

Wurts, Janny. **To Ride Hell's Chasm**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710111-2, 692pp, hardcover, cover by the author, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK [?], 2002; this appears to be a one-off medieval fantasy – not part of the author's "Wars of Light and Shadow" series; it has a post-9/11-type dedication: "For the warriors, may they keep their hearts open...") 4th August 2003.



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